

Sexuality, intimacy and breast cancer

In a perfect world, every relationship would provide the intimacy a person needs to feel happy and secure. In the real world, breast cancer can sometimes make it difficult to have sex. At times, you may only want to be intimate with your partner. At other times, you may want both, or neither. That's okay and quite normal.



Breast cancer does not have to mean the end of sexuality and intimacy. Rather, it can be a new beginning.

How to talk with your partner

If it was hard for you and your partner to talk about sex before you got breast cancer, it will still be difficult, if not harder now. While there is no such thing as the perfect time to talk, some times are better than others. Choose a moment when you are alone and relaxed. When you feel comfortable, give yourself and your partner permission to talk about your feelings, both good and bad. Above all else, be honest. Talking about each other's fears allows you to reassure each other. You may want to try talking about:

- **Your biggest fears** — You may be afraid your partner will reject or leave you because of your breast cancer. You may not feel desirable or worry that your partner finds you less attractive.
- **Your partner's fears** — Your partner may be afraid of physically hurting you during sex. Partners may be confused or unsure of the best way to show support and affection. They may retreat or wait for cues from you about when to resume an intimate or sexual relationship.
- **Birth control** — Pregnancy should be avoided while you are undergoing radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hormone therapy or targeted therapy as these treatments can cause birth defects. It is important to talk to your partner about birth control. After treatment, do not assume that you can no longer become pregnant.
- **Your “new” sex life** — Breast cancer may change what you like to do and how you like to be touched during sex. You may not even want to have sex for a while. Your partner may not know this unless you talk about it. You may find your partner is willing to do anything that will make you happy.

Why don't you...

Get romantic

Bring some romance back into your life. Plan a candle-light dinner. Take a bubble bath. Take the time to nurture your relationship.

Go slow

Don't feel you need to have sex all the time. Kissing and touching can also provide pleasure.

Get comfortable

Sex may now be painful. A water-based lubricant just before sex might help.

To help with vaginal dryness, try an estrogen-free vaginal moisturizer. These products are available without a prescription.

Look for products that contain no estrogen as they are safe for breast cancer survivors. If vaginal dryness continues to be a problem, talk with your doctor. He or she may be able to give you a prescription for something that will help.

Do something different

Change your routine. Try new things. Have fun.

Get advice

Consider joining a support group or seek advice from a marriage counselor or sex therapist. You can go with your partner or by yourself.

Share this list of ideas with your partner. Getting the intimacy and support you need should not be your responsibility alone.

Looking in the mirror

Breast cancer may change the way you look. It can also change the way you feel about yourself. While most women agree that their breasts are only part of what defines them as a woman, they may still be deeply affected by the change in or loss of their breast(s).

A woman's breasts symbolize so many things — motherhood, sexuality and just being a woman. But for some women, breasts also now represent cancer. Most women, and their partners, will need to take time to grieve the loss of their breast(s).

Joining a support group may help you cope with all the changes in your body and self-image. Some women find these changes difficult. Others find strength in their new image of themselves. Remind yourself that healing takes time. At some point, you will become more comfortable with your body. Accepting yourself as you are is part of the process.

Resources

Susan G. Komen®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists (AASECT)
202-449-1099 www.aasect.org

International Society for the Study of Women's Sexual Health (ISSWSH)
847-517-7225 www.isswsh.org

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Resources
- Getting the Support You Need
- Talking With Your Partner

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