

Impact of ovarian cancer on your sexual relationship

It may come as a surprise to you, that cancer can have an impact on your sexual relationship with your partner. This may become apparent immediately at diagnosis or as your partner progresses through treatment and beyond.

Think about the role that sex played in your relationship before the cancer diagnosis and think about how it has changed now. Cancer is a relationship disease; this means that it has the capacity to impact the various relationship that you have with those around you. Gynaecological cancers have a long-lasting effect on both patients and their partners sexual health.

Cancer puts pressure on many aspects of our relationship, particularly our intimate relationship. This may or may not be spoken about. Cancer treatment impacts sexual function and sexual desire. Your partner's physical appearance may have changed as a result of treatment, and she may feel less attractive or desirable. You may not feel the same, but it may cause a spoken or unspoken distance between the two of you.

Why does sexual dysfunction happen?

The World Health Organisation tells us that over 90% of all women with a gynaecological cancer will at some stage suffer from a **psychosexual dysfunction** (vaginal dryness, unable to have penetrative sex and low desire are some examples). The causes of sexual dysfunction can be a combination of physical and psychological. The treatment of cancer particularly those involving the reproductive organs, such as cervical cancer can directly impact function and desire.

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Treatments such as **chemotherapy** and **radiotherapy** can cause pain, **fatigue**, nausea, **constipation**, vomiting and **vaginal dryness** to mention a few. All of these can directly impact sexual function.

Your partner may be feeling sad, depressed, and anxious as a result of the treatment, this too can attribute to a lack of desire. Cancer can leave physical marks such as weight gain/loss, surgical scars, hair loss and **menopause** to mention a few. These physical changes can make your partner feel undesirable and insecure.

What to do?

Your intimate relationship with your partner is as unique as your fingertip. So try not to compare yourself to others. Intimacy means different things to each one of us and we can show it in various ways. The most important thing is to keep the connection you have alive. This is a team effort and may take months or years negotiating the new norm. However, it is not impossible, and it can be done!

Here are some useful tips *

Give yourself time.

You and your partner will need time to adjust to the physical and emotional changes cancer causes. It is important that you display patience with your partner and give them the time they need to come to terms with the changes to their body.

Communication.

Keeping the lines of communication open is possibly the most important thing that you and your partner can do. The role that trust plays when it comes to your intimate relationship is not to be underestimated. Your partner may be very anxious about engaging in sexual activity after treatment. This may be for a very good reason. She may have had radiotherapy to the area and may have been given **vaginal dilators** to use because of treatment. Her desire for sex may be very low. Talking through this may be the first step to getting your intimate life back on the right track. Both of you may be fearful that sex will hurt. It most likely will depending on the treatment. Talking openly about your fears, whatever they may be, can help you understand each other's needs and preferences.

Be open to making changes

What worked for you sexually in your 20's may not work for you in your 30's or 40's etc. This is true for your partner as well. Adding a gynaecological cancer into the mix may require your partner to be very explicit about those changes. Knowing that they have a safe space to articulate this can be instrumental to the success of your sexual future. Know that after certain cancer treatment, some sexual positions may hurt and certain activities that once gave you and your partner pleasure may not any more. For example, for some women, pain during intercourse may be relieved if the woman is on top, controlling the level of penetration. Be open to listen to your partners needs and explore limitation and expectations together.

Validate each other's feelings.

It is likely that you and your partner will have your own questions and concerns. It's important to listen to each other's feelings without interrupting or being dismissive. Empathise with your partner and try not to take things personally. Avoid statements like, "Everything is going to be great." Instead, say things like, "Although I can't fix it, I am here for you."

Get reacquainted.

You and your partner may have disconnected from each other over the course of the cancer journey. This is common and you are not alone. Emotional closeness and companionship go hand in hand and are important to your relationship and may help rebuild physical intimacy. Start out slowly, by cuddling, kissing and touching. Learn to touch, hold hands and simply relax together. Each day, make a point to say, "I love you," to your partner. Please look at the **Sensate Focus Exercise** for a guided practice.

Experiment and get creative with intimacy.

Even if your partner cannot have sexual intercourse, you can still maintain intimacy through loving affection and touch. Set the tone by creating a relaxing atmosphere, dim the lights, light a candle and put on romantic music. Give your partner a massage. Ask her permission where you can touch, be gentle and concentrate on areas that she feels most secure. Focus on the sensual, not the sexual. Making space for each other in your lives can go a long way. Simple examples are watching a movie, going for a walk or going out for date night. Intimacy does not have to happen in the bedroom alone!

Plan ahead.

As we get old spontaneous sex can become less and we often have to make space for it in our busy lives. When cancer is in the mix your partners sexual desire may vary during cancer treatment, as may yours due to the various changes that have taken place because of the cancer. It may help to plan sex/intimacy for when your partner has the most energy. You may have found yourself in the caregiving role, this can make it more challenging to be sexy around one another. Where possible try to clearly separate time for caregiving and time together as a couple.

Talk with your doctor.

Doctors often won't bring up the subject of psychosexual health and how your partners sex life will be impacted during cancer treatment unless you or they ask. Although it can be an uncomfortable discussion, it's an important one to have. Your doctor can clear up any concerns, including the impact of cancer treatment on sexual function. Also, encourage your partner to let her doctor know about the sexual dysfunction she is experiencing throughout treatment.

Seek professional help.

For some couples, a professional counsellor can help facilitate communication. This may be in the form of a medical social worker, a psycho oncologist, a systemic psychotherapist, a sex therapist, or a nurse specialist. Please see our **Service directory** for more information. In addition, support groups can give you both a place to voice your fears and concerns. By talking openly about issues, you can come up with new ways to build intimacy in your relationship.

Work as a team.

During cancer treatment, it is especially important to work with your partner. The closeness and companionship that comes from teamwork may help you feel more secure and in control. By communicating effectively and making an effort to maintain intimacy, your relationship can flourish in the face of cancer.

Useful Resources

Book

Cancer, Intimacy and sexuality: A practical Approach 2017

Editors Reisman, Y & Gianottes, W.

Booklet on Sexuality for cancer patients and their partners.

This really helpful booklet by Dr Kathrin Kirchheiner, a psychosexual therapist looks at ways of overcoming loss of libido as a result of cancer and overcoming low sexual desire. It provides useful tips and tricks for an active sex life for you and/or your partner.

[Loss of libido after cancer](#)

[Intimacy and sexuality for cancer patients and their partners](#)

Mindfulness

Mindfulness can also assist you in getting in the mood. Please find attached a simple mindfulness exercise called the Raisin Meditation (have a raisin or another piece of small fruit in hand do to it!)

<https://soundcloud.com/hachetteaudiouk/the-raisin-meditation>

Sexy Stories

To help you and your partner get in the mood try listening to some sexy stories

[Dipsea | Short and Sexy Audio Stories \(dipseastories.com\)](#)

Websites

A Canadian website devoted to providing up-to-date, factual information on sexual health and education supported by the Canadian Obstetrics and Gynaecological Society.

<https://www.sexandu.ca/>

Another excellent resourceful website from Canada is by clinical psychologist Dr Lori Brotto. This website keeps you up to date with the latest research as well as exploring sexual difficulties.

www.obgyn.ubc.ca/SexualHealth

*This has been modified from Cancer Treatment Centres of America