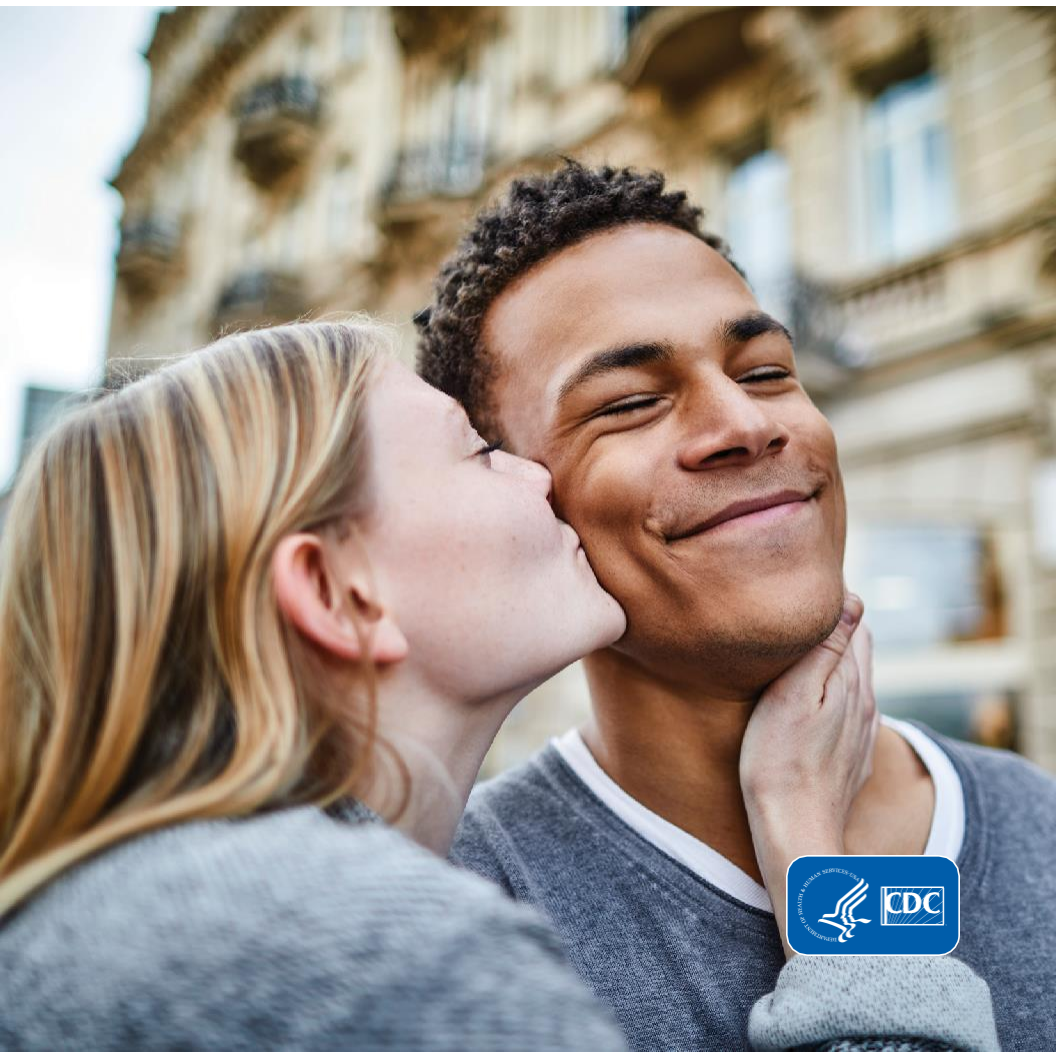


Guide to Healthy Living

SEXUAL HEALTH AND INTIMACY



HERE'S TO YOU

There is no right way to recover after your cancer treatment is over. Cancer is a disease that can affect many parts of life, including your sexual health. It is important for cancer survivors to work to reestablish their sexual health and intimacy on their road to recovery.

Finding your “new normal” as a cancer survivor is a journey. That’s where this guide comes in. You’ll find expert information, practical tips, and trusted resources that can help you and your health care partners come up with a plan that feels right for where you are today. Let’s get started.

OUR GUIDE CAN HELP YOU

- Understand the common physical, emotional, and relationship aspects of being a cancer survivor or being in an intimate relationship with a survivor.
- Reach out to professionals who can help.
- Talk to your partner about sexual issues.
- Understand what to expect and how to adapt to the “new normal” that comes after cancer as a cancer survivor or partner of a cancer survivor.

“If someone’s looking to get back in a dating pool after treatment and through remission, my greatest bit of advice would be: want to be with *you* first. Once you decide to be with you and you can look at yourself and not be as turned off, both inwardly and outwardly, that would be your greatest component to take with you into the dating game.”

MARK

Hodgkin Lymphoma

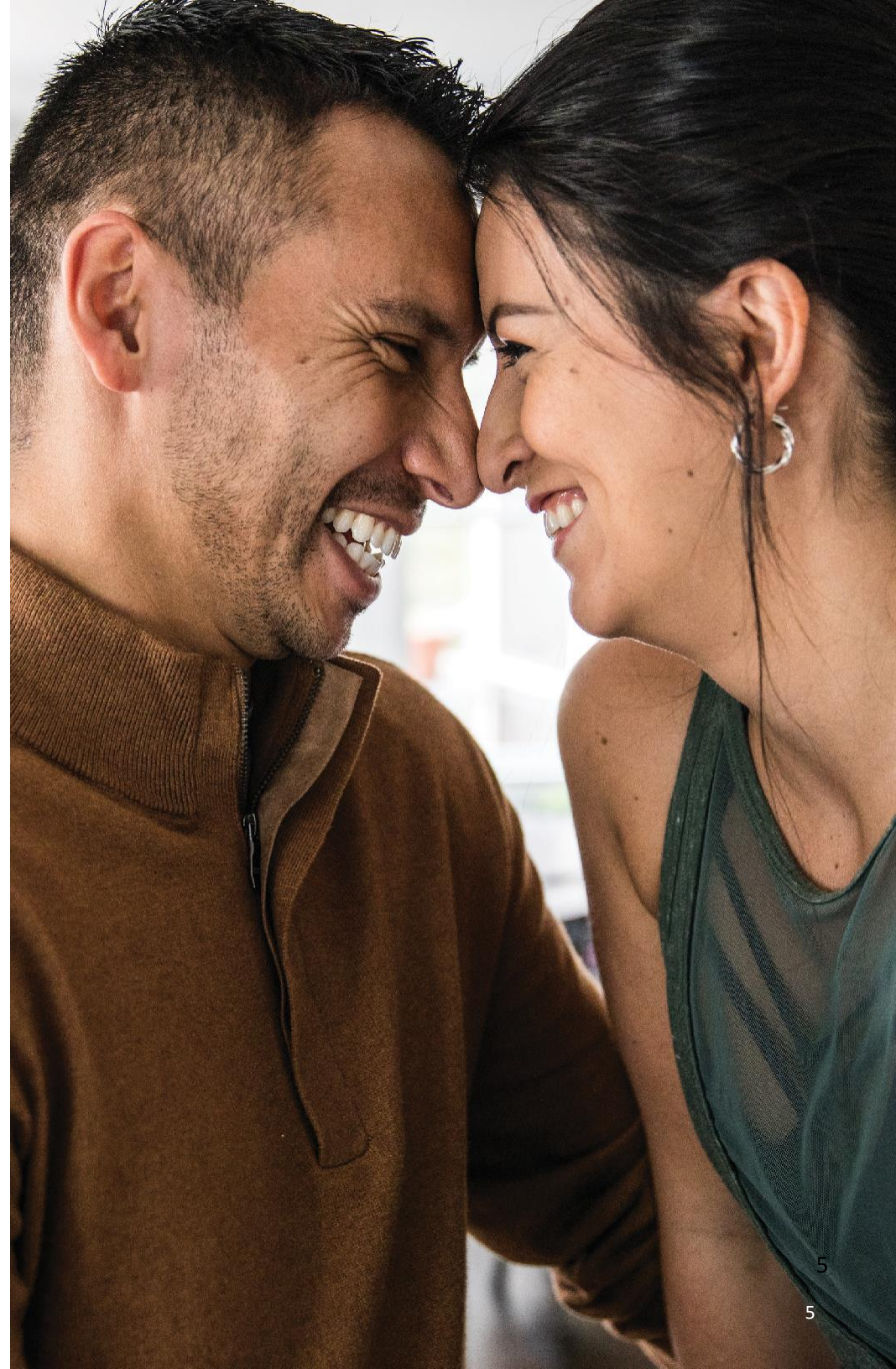
COMMON SEXUAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND WHO CAN HELP

Sexual health and intimacy are important parts of a person's well-being. They are closely linked to how you see yourself and relate to others. After cancer treatment, it can be challenging to face sexual health concerns, even if you've been with your partner for years. But talking about your concerns openly and honestly—letting your partner know what you're going through and understanding how they feel—may prevent frustration and confusion.

COMMON CONCERNS AND CHALLENGES

- Worrying about intimacy after treatment.
- Struggling with body image after treatment.
- Fearing that having sex will hurt, that you won't be able to perform, or that your partner will find you less attractive.
- Not being able to have sex as you did before. Some cancer treatments cause changes in sex organs that can affect your sex life. This can include not being able to get or keep an erection, pain, or loss of sensation.
- Menopausal symptoms, such as hot flashes, dryness or tightness in the vagina, or other problems that can affect your desire to have sex.
- Concerns about losing the ability to have children. Depending on the type of treatment, your age, and the length of time since treatment, you may still be able to have children. Talk to your doctor or a specialist if you're concerned about fertility.

If you need help talking about sexual health, intimacy, or fertility, there are resources to help. The first step is talking with your doctor. He or she can help you with changes you're going through that may be related to your cancer or its treatment. Your doctor can also refer you to programs or professionals who offer sexual intimacy counseling for cancer survivors.



HOW TO GET HELP

Whether you have concerns about having (or not having) children, physical problems relating to sexual health and intimacy, medication side effects, or your emotional state, professionals can help you.

- **Psychologists, clinical social workers, and counselors** can help you talk through and process problems you're struggling with, like stress or body image issues. Professionals who specialize in infertility counseling can also help you with the emotional considerations of various options for building your family.
- **Marital counselors** are trained specifically to help people strengthen their marriages and partnerships by addressing challenges. They can help start and guide conversations between you and your partner.
- **Faith or spiritual counselors** can help you cope with feeling alone, searching for meaning, and having doubts about your faith.
- **Obstetrician-gynecologists (ob-gyns)** are doctors who specialize in the female reproductive system and pregnancy. They can answer questions about fertility, birth control, menopause, and reproductive health. Your ob-gyn may refer you to a fertility specialist.
- **Fertility specialists** (also called reproductive endocrinologists) can determine your ability to have children and offer options for starting or building a family. They evaluate cancer diagnosis, treatment, and possible late side effects of treatment to determine fertility.
- **Urologists** are doctors who specialize in treating the urinary tract system and male reproductive organs.
- **Social workers** are trained to counsel you about treatment issues and interpersonal problems related to cancer. They can connect you with resources and services in your area.
- **Sex therapists** may be able to help you talk openly about your problems, work through your concerns, and come up with new ways to help you and your partner.

If you can't find a program in your area, look into alternatives to in-person support, such as virtual support groups and therapy by phone, video, or text.

“Having a total hysterectomy threw me into early menopause...No one ever said that maybe you should talk to your gynecologist to see if there's something that can be given as a therapy treatment replacement to help you through this. Don't suffer in silence like I did.”

WENORA

Basal Cell Carcinoma, Colorectal, and Endometrial Cancer

MORE INFORMATION

- The National Cancer Institute's **Self-Image and Sexuality** page provides tips on how to cope with body changes and changes in your sex life. www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/self-image
- The **National Cancer Institute** also offers information about sexual health issues in women and men with cancer. www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/sexuality-women and www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/treatment/side-effects/sexuality-men
- The **Livestrong Foundation** provides information about female and male sexual health after cancer. www.livestrong.org/we-can-help/finishing-treatment/female-sexual-health-after-cancer and www.livestrong.org/we-can-help/finishing-treatment/male-sexual-health-after-cancer
- The American Cancer Society's **Fertility and Sexual Side Effects in People with Cancer** page explains how cancer and its treatment may affect intimacy and fertility. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/fertility-and-sexual-side-effects.html
- The **American Society for Reproductive Medicine** provides information and resources on infertility. www.reproductivefacts.org

TALKING WITH YOUR PARTNER

Even for a couple that has been together a long time, staying connected after cancer can be a challenge at first. How do you start the conversation and express your needs when it comes to sex?

It is important to talk about your concerns, feelings, and beliefs about your sex life and what would make you feel better. It is also important to take your partner's concerns, feelings, and beliefs into consideration. Having an open, honest conversation is key to moving forward. Here are some tips:

- Pick a private time to talk about sex outside the bedroom.
- Ask questions to understand your partner's concerns better.
- Focus on your partner's comments, not on what you plan to say in response.
- Repeat what he or she says in your own words.
- Be specific and positive about what you'd like to change.
- Acknowledge that your partner's views matter to you.

By approaching the topic of sex and intimacy openly, you can avoid blame, keep the conversation positive, and give your partner a better sense of how you're feeling.

“It’s hard to really approach your partner without feeling selfish that you don’t want to be touched. You need to convey to your partner that it’s not them that you have an issue with; it’s the changes that have taken place in your body.”

WENORA

Basal Cell Carcinoma, Colorectal, and Endometrial Cancer



STARTING FRESH DATING AS A SURVIVOR

After cancer, you may experience physical and emotional changes and concerns, especially around sex, that can affect how you feel about dating. It is normal to worry about how another person will react to physical things like scars or hair loss. You may also find it awkward to bring up sexual problems or loss of fertility, which can make feeling close even harder.

HOW AND WHEN TO BRING IT UP

You may wonder about the best way to tell a new person in your life about your cancer experience. There's no "right" answer on when to tell someone. Wait until you're comfortable and trust the person with your feelings. It may help to write down or practice what to say. Be ready to answer any questions. You may also want to talk to your doctor or a counselor about your dating concerns and fears of becoming intimate with a new partner.

FEELING INTIMATE AFTER TREATMENT

It may be hard to feel intimate after cancer because of physical or emotional changes. When you're struggling with your body image, remember to:

- Be proud of your body. It got you through treatment, after all!
- Think of things that help you feel more confident.
- Focus on the positive and be open to change.

WHEN YOUR PARTNER IS A CANCER SURVIVOR

When your partner has cancer, it can be hard to understand what he or she is going through. Your partner also may have trouble understanding what you are going through. Ask yourself:

- Am I feeling overwhelmed, stressed, lonely, or abandoned?
- How will my role or situation change after treatment?
- Do I think my partner and I should talk about our sexual relationship?



HOW TO IDENTIFY CREDIBLE INFORMATION SOURCES

The Internet is full of information, and we want to make sure you're getting the right answers.

When determining whether a website offers good information backed by medical evidence, your best bet is to look at the owner. The most credible sites offer information that is backed by unbiased research and has gone through a strict review process to ensure that everything they publish is accurate and beneficial.

Stick to government sites such as CDC or the National Cancer Institute, or well-known organizations such as CDC's Comprehensive Cancer Control National Partnership, local service groups, or health institutions you know.

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www.cdc.gov/cancer/survivors

