



# CANCER & SEX

Everything you wanted to know about your **sexual health** but were afraid to ask.

# Cancer, sex & intimacy



Cancer itself and especially the treatment can change much in sexuality and intimacy. In practice, though, the majority of healthcare professionals (HCPs) do not proactively discuss sexual issues with their patients.



Although it is difficult for nearly all patients and partners to talk about sexuality and intimacy, it can be important to ask your medical team for support and information on the possible changes in your sex life. Once the topic has been brought up by you, most HCPs will react adequately making the topic also easier to talk about during future check-ups.



Since it might have to be you who initiates the conversation about sexuality with HCPs, this leaflet can help you navigate through this issue.



According to the European Charter of Patients' Rights, you have the right to all kind of information regarding your state of health, the health services and how to use them. Moreover, you have the right to the best quality of life, which includes your sexual function and health, regardless of your age, marital status and stage of the disease.



HCPs should communicate all information in a manner that is understandable for you/ in plain language. In addition, your doctor should be dedicated to providing competent and timely medical care, with compassion and respect for your privacy, dignity and patient confidentiality.

## Is your cancer diagnosis and/or treatment affecting your sexual health? **You are not alone!**

Sexuality issues belong to the most common side-effects of cancer diagnosis and its treatment. If you are experiencing physical, emotional and social changes impacting on your sexual health, you are not alone.

If you find it difficult to bring up the topic of sexuality, tell your medical professional about it. You are not the only one and this can take away your stress. It is possible that your healthcare team will find this talk difficult as well. Think about which words can better describe what you are feeling or experiencing and be as specific as possible.

# What are the most common sexual challenges and changes due to cancer?

Cancer and its treatment can affect both your physical and mental health. Below you can find a list of common physical and emotional side-effects that might impact your sexual health.

**Physical health effects** Cancer and its treatment can affect your physical ability to have sex. Common physical changes and sexual disorders include:



- **In women:** vaginal dryness, difficult or painful sexual intercourse, vaginal narrowing or atrophy;
- **In men:** erectile dysfunction, ejaculation disorders;
- **All genders:** tiredness, loss of fertility, loss of desire, changes in sexual sensitivity and responsiveness, painful intercourse, loss of sensitivity in sexual organs and capacity for orgasm and/or different quality of satisfaction, incontinence in urine or stool, stoma, body image changes.

**Mental health effects** As a result of the disease itself or of its related treatment, some of the psycho-social effects you may experience include:



- Anxiety and fear;
- Distress and depression;
- Social withdrawal;
- Self-image changes, low self-esteem or self-confidence;
- Different emotional reactions and feelings (mood changes, sadness, anger, guilt, shame, insecurity and exclusion, uncertainty);
- Altered or disturbed relationship with your partner(s);
- Loss of desire.

## How do you start a conversation about sexuality with your doctor/ health care team?

Check out the recommended questions below!

Whether you are single or partnered, it is important to ask for information and support related to your sexual health. It is especially important to ask before the treatment starts, as it may determine which treatment approach is the best for you. **Before going to your consultation, think about your specific issues and write your questions and concerns down.**

- 'Is it normal that I experience sexual changes due to treatment?'
- 'Which sexual side-effects am I likely to experience during and after my treatment?'
- 'Are the sexual side-effects I am experiencing permanent? Will they go away on their own?'
- 'Is it normal that my recommended treatment affects my sexual desire?'
- 'Will my sexual desire come back?'
- 'What can I do if I experience vaginal dryness/erectile dysfunction?'
- 'What can I do if I experience pain during intercourse?'
- 'What can my sexual partner do to make me more comfortable?'
- 'How can/will cancer affect my body image and sexual health?'
- 'Who can I talk to in more detail for this questions/concerns?'
- 'Can my partner and I get professional help for sexual problems? Where?'
- 'Where can I find relevant information on the Internet?'



# Do you have any questions about sexuality? Here is where you can find more information and seek advice!

## Which healthcare professionals should you talk to?

Most healthcare professionals can offer advice and treatment that can help you or refer you to someone who can help you understand and cope with your feelings or any changes. The most important thing is that you approach someone in your healthcare team you trust and feel comfortable with. If you would like to talk about issues connected to physical side-effects, you can start with your general practitioner, your oncologist or specialist nurse. In case you needed further emotional and social support, ask for a referral to a psycho-sexual therapist, a psychologist or a social worker.

Please note that availability of different specialists and related insurance coverage depends on how the healthcare system is organised in your country. If you are unsure about who to contact, ask your oncologist or oncology nurse.

Be aware that most sexual issues appear only sometime after the treatment. In this case, your general practitioner is the first one who can help you and refer you to an appropriate expert depending on your problem. You may not always find an expert who is sensitive and discussing about your intimacy and sexuality with them can be uncomfortable. In these cases, it is important to tell the professional and find one who you can trust and feel comfortable with.

## Which medical societies provide credible information?

Many cancer societies, patient support organisations, health professionals' associations and hospitals provide plenty of good information and often offer free-of-charge online consultations with experts and phone helplines. You can also check websites of psycho-sexual therapists and psychologists in your country.

If you struggle to find reliable information online, ask your healthcare team to help you. You can start with the websites of your national/local:

- Cancer society
- Patient support organisation
- Hospital
- Cancer information site of medical professionals and societies

## KEY TAKEAWAYS!

1. Sexuality means different things to different people, and people express their sexuality in their own unique ways.
2. Sexuality does not disappear when a person is diagnosed with cancer, but it can have different meanings throughout the pathway and may require adjustment during the different phases (diagnosis/ treatment/ after cancer) of your journey. Even in the last (palliative) phase people continue to be sexual beings and may need intimate or sexual contact.
3. The illness and its treatment can cause disturbances and changes to your sexual health. Some of them can be temporary but others can last long-term.
4. Taking care of your intimacy is very important. Masturbation as well as talking, listening, touching, holding and caressing others can improve your mental health and facilitate your sexual activity.
5. It might be a good idea to invite your partner(s) to the medical consultations and sessions where you plan to talk about your sexual health and problems.
6. Friends, family and other survivors can be helpful to partially alleviate your emotional challenges.
7. Your sexual health matters and taking care of your sexual health is important. It is ok to request information on sexuality issues and to receive practical advice and emotional support from HCPs.