

Sexual Health

Let's talk about sex

Sexual health during and after a blood cancer diagnosis or disorder is considered by many to be a taboo subject that no one wants to talk about. However, sexual health is an important part of life and rest assured, many other people have the same questions and fears you do! Remember everyone's diagnosis and treatment plan are different, so what you experience will likely be different to what someone else does.

A blood cancer diagnosis doesn't necessarily mean the end of your sex life, but you might need to temporarily change your routine or your typical love-making positions. Adapt to your 'new normal' – don't be afraid to try new things or start slow.

Don't feel embarrassed; sex and intimacy are a part of life, and therefore how your diagnosis impacts it is just another regular topic for discussion with your treatment team.

How you might be feeling

What might change during and after treatment:

- *Your feelings – you could be nervous, anxious, or just not in the mood*
- *Your body's production of the hormones that are needed for sexual response*
- *Your physical ability to give and receive sexual pleasure*
- *Your energy levels – if you're feeling tired from treatment, you probably won't feel like having sex*
- *Men may experience erectile difficulties*
- *Women may experience menopausal symptoms / dryness*
- *Roles and relationships in your life.*

Chemotherapy, radiotherapy and sex

Chemotherapy and radiotherapy side effects may include tiredness, nausea, vomiting, constipation, hair loss, and mouth ulcers. Understandably, a lot of these side effects could reduce your desire to have sex. Certain treatments can cause vaginal dryness, so you may want to use a lubricant during sex. New (or recently opened) plain, water-soluble lubricants are suitable.

Condoms must be worn during vaginal, anal, and oral sex in the seven days following a treatment session. Chemotherapy drugs can be excreted in your bodily fluids, so this will decrease the risk of exposing your partner to them. Condoms are also recommended as trying to fall pregnant during treatment is usually best avoided, as chemotherapy and radiotherapy could affect an unborn child.

Some treatments can affect sperm quality or have detrimental effects on an unborn child or mother, so attempting to fall pregnant may not be advisable. It would be best if you discussed this with your treatment team. You may also want to find out whether sperm/ova preservation is a possibility before treatment commences, as some treatments can affect fertility in the long term.

Neutropenia or low platelet counts

If you are neutropenic (have a low level of white cells, which fight infection) or have low platelet counts, you should always check with your doctor before getting the go-ahead to resume regular sex. Sex can cause abrasions or bruising, which can leave the skin open to the risk of infection. If you're in one of these groups, the risk of infection is much higher.

Sometimes, despite all your best hygiene practices and precautions, infections can still happen. Remember, they are nobody's fault! Discuss all infection symptoms and concerns with your treatment team.

Tips for maintaining intimacy

Talking and listening to each other and just being touched is enough to maintain that intimate bond. Being emotionally close to someone is important.

- *Talk openly with your partner and discuss any concerns you may have about resuming sexual activity; it will show you trust them. Discuss what you might need to change*
- *Ask your partner how they feel about everything that's happening; they might have concerns or questions of their own*
- *Take it slow. You don't have to jump back into having sex immediately. Try starting with a few cuddles or a massage.*
- *Be patient, and don't have huge expectations you might not be able to fulfil. Take your time to reconnect with your partner.*
- *Be wary of being too rough or vigorous. As mentioned earlier, vaginal and penile abrasions can become infected, so make sure you take it easy.*
- *Speak with your doctor if you are concerned about knowing your limits.*

FAQ's

“Do I have to be gentle?”

It's a good idea. Sex can cause penile and vaginal abrasions, which can become infected. Depending on what is happening with your disease and treatment, you could be at a high risk for infection.

“I've just had a transplant; when can I resume sexual activity?”

Your treatment team may want your platelet counts to return to a certain level before you engage in sexual intercourse. Ensure you check this with them.

“How can we reduce anxiety?”

Coping with tension and anxiety is helped by relaxing your mind and body. Meditation and massage may help create the right mood.

Our Blood Cancer Support Coordinators are available to chat about any concerns you may have around sex, intimacy, body image, and your diagnosis.

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