

Managing Sex, Intimacy and Body Image

While Having Radiation Treatment for Head and Neck Cancer

For patients and families

Read this brochure to learn about:

- How head and neck cancer can affect sex, intimacy, and body image
- What you can do to return to sexual activities and feel good
- Where to go for more information about sexuality, intimacy and cancer

Sexual health can be an important part of health and wellbeing. If you need more information, talk with your Radiation Therapy team (doctor, radiation therapist or nurse). The team will make you feel at ease by answering your questions and offering ways to help.



How does head and neck cancer affect sexual health and intimacy?

Sexual health includes sexual activities, your desire to have sex, how you see yourself (body image), and intimacy. Intimacy is the physical and emotional closeness you share with another person.

If you are having radiation therapy, chemotherapy, or both, this can cause changes to your sexual health and intimacy. Some changes include:

- **Dry mouth.** A common side effect of radiation treatment is not producing enough saliva. This may cause dry mouth and bad breath, which affects kissing and oral sex.
- **Changes to your body** such as surgical scars and grafts, gastrostomy tube, tracheostomy and skin changes. Cancer and its treatment can change how your body looks, feels and acts. Some of these changes may be temporary and some may be permanent, but they can all cause anxiety and concerns about how you see and feel about your body.
- **Not wanting to have sex (low sex drive).** You may not want to think about sex early on your diagnosis. This could be because of the physical effects of treatment (nausea, pain, discomfort, changes to your appearance, fatigue), the emotional effects of treatment (anxiety, depression, shame), or both. It is important to remember that the way you feel now may change later on. It can take some time to recover and begin to feel the desire to have sex. This process is different for everyone.

What can I do to manage these effects?

Here are some tips you can try if you have any of these common effects:

- **Dry mouth:** Keep your mouth clean and moist throughout the day. Rinse your mouth with baking soda, salt or flat club soda. For more information on mouth rinses, see the mouth rinse section in the pamphlet "Taking Care of your Mouth During Cancer Treatment". Speak with your health care team about a saliva substitute. If you have mouth sores, do not give oral sex.

- **Concerns about your body image** (how you see yourself and your body):
 1. Be kind to yourself. You are likely the most critical of your body.
 2. Even though your body may look or feel different, you may discover other strengths you did not know you had.
 3. Talk to your partner about your fears and feelings.
- **A gastrostomy tube (G-tube) and feeling self-conscious about your tube:**
 - Consider wearing a shirt that covers the tube when you are being intimate.
 - Avoid lying on your stomach during any sexual activity. To avoid lying on your stomach when having sex with penetration (putting a penis, finger or sex toy inside any body opening), try different positions like side lying, having one partner with the tube on top, or having the partner with the tube behind.
 Try not to strain your stomach muscles. To prevent the feeding equipment getting in the way, avoid intimate acts during feeds. Make sure the tube is taped securely.
 - Communicate with your partner on what works best. Remember there are other ways to enjoy sex, such as using your hands and mouth.
- **A tracheostomy:** Make sure your tracheostomy is secure. Try positions that will not block your airway. For example, try having the person with the tracheostomy be on top so they are in control of the thrusting. Clear your secretions (mucus in your lungs) before intimate activities. Having your partner not directly in front of the tracheostomy can avoid secretions accidentally spraying in their direction.
- **Don't feel like having sex (low sex drive):**
 - Start slowly and gently, with realistic expectations. Easing into sexual activities will help you build your confidence.
 - Begin by talking with your partner or try writing your thoughts down first. Your partner may also be nervous about sex, and feel anxious about hurting you. Talking to each other may prevent

misunderstandings. Talk about what works for you, and what feels good. Sharing thoughts about sex and sexual health can improve your intimacy levels.

- You can still be affectionate with your partner and feel close to them by holding hands, hugging or giving massages.

What if I'm not ready to be in a relationship?

The physical and emotional changes after your cancer treatment may make it difficult for you to accept your new self. The thought of starting new relationships can be overwhelming and you may want to avoid intimate relationships altogether.

The most important thing to remember is that you are not alone. Other people are also going through this. Consider joining a peer support group and learning about how others are coping new relationships. Your health care team is also always here to provide expert support and guidance.

Can I be sexually active while I'm having radiation treatment?

Yes, it is safe to be sexually active during radiation therapy if you feel well enough. You do not pose a risk to your partner as you are not radioactive. If you have mouth sores, do not give oral sex.

Can I be sexually active while I'm having chemotherapy?

If you are having chemotherapy, talk to your health care team for more information.

Note: If your blood and platelet counts go down, please be careful during sex with penetration to avoid infections and bleeds. If you have sex that could result in pregnancy, we recommend using an internal or external condom.

I heard the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) caused my type of cancer. What does this mean?

If you have oropharyngeal cancer (cancer in the back of the throat, tongue, and tonsils), you may have been told that this was caused by a sexually transmitted infection called HPV.

This does not necessarily mean you or your partner engaged in risky sexual behaviours or had other partners during your relationship. Instead, you or your partner may have had the HPV virus before but did not have symptoms. This may have been years or even decades ago and it is very unlikely that you are infectious now.

Talk to your partner about how you feel about your diagnosis. If you have more than one partner, follow safer sex practices to prevent the spread of the HPV virus by wearing condoms over the penis for sex with penetration or dental dams for oral sex (a thin, square piece of rubber or latex placed over the genital area).

For more information about HPV, HPV vaccines and relationships, talk to your health care team or watch our Know about [Human Papillomavirus \(HPV\) videos](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?app=desktop&list=PLaLgrtXadEF8wwCOefWSkQYlinJfNHbyV) (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?app=desktop&list=PLaLgrtXadEF8wwCOefWSkQYlinJfNHbyV>).

What resources are available for 2SLGBTQIA+ communities?

- Visit the [Queering Cancer](https://queeringcancer.ca/) (<https://queeringcancer.ca/>) website to read stories from other patients, access a peer support forum, and find cancer resources specific to 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals in their searchable database. Ask your health care team if you need help with these resources.
- See the Health and Sexual Health chapter of the [Sexual and Gender Diversity + Cancer: A Guide to Resources in the Community](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Sexual_Gender_Diversity_Cancer.pdf) (https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Sexual_Gender_Diversity_Cancer.pdf) for a list of organizations that have a respectful and positive view about sexuality, relationships, general health and well-being.

Talk to your Radiation Therapy Team (doctor, radiation therapist or nurse). They are here to support you and can help you find the resources that you are looking for.

Where to get more information and support

Brochures

- [Sex, Intimacy and Cancer](https://cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/resources/publications/sex-intimacy-and-cancer) (Canadian Cancer Society)
<https://cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/resources/publications/sex-intimacy-and-cancer>
- [Intimacy and Sex: For people with cancer and their partners](https://www.cancercareontario.ca/sites/ccocancercare/files/IntimacyandSex.pdf)
Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario)
<https://www.cancercareontario.ca/sites/ccocancercare/files/IntimacyandSex.pdf>

Workshops

Look Good Feel Better offers free programs for women and teaches ways to manage how cancer and its treatment impact appearance. It also teaches self-esteem.

For more information, call: 1 800 914 5665 or visit website: www.lgfb.ca.

Referrals

We have referrals to specialists that can help you cope with the sexual side effects of your diagnosis and treatment. If you and your partner would like to talk to someone, please speak with your Radiation Therapy team for a referral.

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to the Canadian Cancer Society and Ontario Health (Cancer Care Ontario) for sharing their patient education content.



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