

Breast Cancer: Your Emotions, Body Image and Sexual Health

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Your emotions

An encounter with breast cancer can start when you notice a change. It may be a lump or a thickening in the breast. It could be nipple discharge (loss of fluid) or pain. Such uncommon signs may raise thoughts of cancer.

The same thoughts of cancer can also start when your doctor becomes concerned after you have a mammogram (a test of the breast using low-energy x-rays). The doctor gives you a check-up. He or she explains that cancer is a possible diagnosis (finding).

While waiting for the diagnosis, it is common for patients to feel anxious, worried and to fear the worst. When the doctor tells you that you have breast cancer, your first reaction may be shock. You may feel anxious or even helpless.

Questions may arise:

- Will I live?
- Will I need chemotherapy?
- What will I look like after the surgery?

This can be a difficult time with changing emotions and everyone reacts in their own way. You may feel you are able to manage or you may feel overwhelmed. It is important to know that coping with your normal feelings often means giving attention to your emotional recovery, as well as to your physical recovery from breast cancer.

Common and normal emotions you may be feeling

Fear

When you feel your life is threatened, it is normal to feel scared. You may start imagining the worst. You may fear being sick, being in pain, and you may fear death.

Sadness

Cancer brings with it many losses. You may lose an important part of your body. You may lose your sense of being healthy, of your ability to control what happens to you, or what you expected your life to be like. It is normal to feel sadness when you have felt all these feelings of loss.

Anger

When your expectations of how your life will unfold are shattered, feelings of anger may arise. You may be angry at the unfairness of being diagnosed with cancer, or at fate. You may be angry at your doctor for giving you bad news. You may even be angry at yourself.

Numbness (no feelings)

Feeling numb or nothing at all is also an emotional response. It is a way of protecting yourself from deep feelings which may overwhelm you. When you are first diagnosed, feeling numb or nothing is very normal. If it continues, this is a sign that you may need to talk to a social worker, counselor, therapist or support group (see page 20 for a list of phone numbers).

How you can cope

Emotional support

Sharing your feelings and getting emotional support can help your state of mind. This is very important when you are still in shock from a cancer diagnosis. Having this support can help you make difficult medical choices and it can help you cope with treatment.

Pick at least one person who will be your support during this time.

- Someone to help you 'hear'.
- Someone to be your advocate.
- Someone to 'just listen'.

This can be your:

- partner
- lover
- close friend
- sibling or parent
- co-worker or boss
- someone from your community
- a health professional (like a nurse, or social worker)

Information

You need information to help you make an informed decision about your treatment.

These decisions are important to the rest of your life. Take the time you need to get and understand the information.

Your cancer took a long time to develop. Except in a few cases, your prognosis (how a disease is likely to affect you) will not be affected by waiting a day or even a few weeks until you feel you can make a good decision.

There are library resources you can use to get more information. You will find breast cancer-related books, pamphlets, videos and other resources.

- Princess Margaret – Breast Cancer Resource Room (M. Lau Breast Centre, 2nd floor)
- Princess Margaret Patient & Family Library (Main Floor Atrium)
- Mount Sinai Hospital – The Marvella Koffler Breast Centre (12th Floor)

Time for yourself

Being close to others is important at a time like this. But you may also need time alone to focus on yourself and your feelings.

Your body image

Your body image is the way you think and feel about your body. It is an important part of who you are. For most women, breasts are an important part of their bodies.

In many cultures, breasts symbolize femininity or womanhood. Breasts may be valued because they allow women to breast feed. They may also be valued because they can give sexual pleasure.

Having surgery to either remove your breast, or change the look of your breast, may affect the way you think and feel about your body. A change in your body image may affect your feelings about yourself. It is normal to have questions at this time:

- What will the scar look like?
- How will I react to the scar?
- How will my partner or future partner react to the scar?

Talk to members of your breast surgery team about your concerns. They can help you find answers to your questions. They can also help you cope with any feelings that you may have as you adjust to the change in the look of your breast, or to the loss of your breast.

How you can cope

Look at your scar

Research shows that women who look at their scars soon after their surgery seem to cope better than those who wait longer to look. But, every woman is different. You need to choose a time that is right for you, when you feel ready.

You can have someone with you when you look at your scar for the first time. The nurses on the inpatient unit, or the social worker are ready to give you emotional support, if you want it.

Remind yourself that the scar will change, for the better, over time. Once your sutures (stitches/staples) have been removed, touch your scar. If you have a partner, and when you feel ready, encourage your partner to look at and feel your scar.

Find ways to look and feel better

- Pay attention to and treat the rest of your body. For example, put effort into doing your hair and applying makeup. Get a manicure. Wear clothes that make you feel good. Treat yourself to a massage.
- Focus on the parts of your body you feel comfortable with. Perhaps your smile or the color of your eyes. Ask someone else (a partner or friend) to tell you what they think are your most attractive features.

How you can cope after having a mastectomy (surgery to remove the breast)

Mourn the loss of your breast

It is common for women who have had a mastectomy to feel a sense of loss.

Mourning or grieving the loss can be emotionally painful and sad. But going through these feelings will help you to slowly accept the changes to your body.

Over time, you will develop a new body image that is comfortable for you.

Consider whether wearing a prosthesis is right for you

A prosthesis is an artificial breast form that you can fit into a bra or swimsuit. Some women feel comfortable wearing a prosthesis. Other women choose to go without. The choice is yours.

If you want a prosthesis right after surgery, you can get a temporary one from the Canadian Cancer Society's (1-888-939-3333) One to One Peer Support, or Cancer Connection Program.

You can buy a permanent prosthesis 6 weeks after surgery. If you do, you can get financial support to pay for it.

Go to the Princess Margaret's Breast Clinic for application forms for funding assistance (the Assistive Devices Program, Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care form) and a list of places where you can buy your prosthesis. You will need your surgeon to sign it.

Consider whether a breast reconstruction is right for you

Breast reconstruction is when the shape of the breast(s) is rebuilt after part, or all of the breast(s), is removed during surgery.

Some women get breast reconstruction. If this is something you would like to consider, talk to your surgeon. He or she can answer any questions you may have. You can also ask your nurse for resources or information to help you decide.

Your sexual health

We are all sexual beings. Our sexuality includes the ways we view and express ourselves sexually throughout our lives. Sexuality involves not only sexual behavior, but also our sexual feelings, desires, thoughts, and fantasies.

Sexuality is tied to our needs for intimacy, closeness, connection, reproduction, touch, playfulness, caring and pleasure. Our sexuality can be shaped by many things, including:

- Culture and religion
- Family values
- Messages from the media
- Personal experiences

The way we feel about our own sexuality affects our enjoyment of regular daily activities, our self-image, and our relationships with others. Our sexuality continues to be part of who we are during times of health and illness. All people are sexual beings, whether they are single or in a relationship.

We all need to feel the kind of closeness and connection that comes from being held, hugged, kissed, touched, and loved. This can be especially true when we are faced with a serious medical illness, like cancer.

Being diagnosed with breast cancer and going through treatment can affect how you feel about your body and your sexuality. Pain, fatigue (tiredness), and concerns about your health can make you feel stressed and shut down your interest in sex.

Some of the treatments for breast cancer can change the way your body responds sexually, which can affect your sexual pleasure and appetite for sex (sex drive, or libido). However, there are many steps that you can take to prevent or cope with sexual side effects and improve your sex life.

The next sections of this pamphlet will describe some of the common sexual side effects of treatments for breast cancer, as well as some ways that you can take control over your sexuality and feel better.

Breast cancer treatments

Treatment for breast cancer may involve a mastectomy (surgery to remove the breast), a partial mastectomy (surgery to remove a part of the breast), radiation treatment and/or chemotherapy.

After breast cancer surgery, you can still experience sexual pleasure and have an orgasm. However, you may experience some changes in body image, self-esteem, and sensation (like in the breast area). These changes can affect your sexual desire and pleasure.

Mastectomy (surgery to remove the breast)

In many cultures, breasts represent beauty, femininity and womanhood. Also, touching of the breasts or nipples during foreplay and sex can add to sexual pleasure and excitement.

Having a breast removed can be shocking or traumatic. It is common for women to experience negative changes to their sense of sexual attractiveness. Some women feel self-conscious or embarrassed about the way their body looks after their breast has been removed. They may worry about getting naked in front of a partner.

When a breast is removed, it can leave a woman unsure of whether her partner will accept her and find her sexually pleasing. These worries can interfere with sexual desire and pleasure. The scars left after the surgery can be tender for a while, and may later feel itchy or numb.

So, mastectomy treatment for breast cancer removes a key part of sexual pleasure for some women and changes the way that touch is experienced.

Partial mastectomy (lumpectomy)

A lumpectomy removes only a tumour (cancer lump) in the breast, and some breast tissue around it. If surgery removes only the tumour, and is followed by radiation treatment, the breast will have a scar.

The skin over and around the scar may feel different from the way the skin felt before the surgery. The scar will be smaller after a lumpectomy than after a full mastectomy. The breast may also be different in size and shape compared to before the surgery, and compared to the other breast.

During radiation treatment, the skin may become red and swollen for some time. The breast can also be tender or hard. In most cases, the nipple feels normal. After the breast heals, you can continue to experience pleasure through touch and caressing.

Radiation treatment

Most women who have had surgeries for breast cancer will also get radiation treatment. The purpose of radiation treatment is to destroy cancer cells. The side effects from radiation treatment will depend on:

- The size of the area being treated
- Your treatment schedule
- The total dose (amount) of radiation you get

Side effects also vary from person to person, and may or may not affect your sexual functioning and pleasure. During radiation treatment you may notice:

- That you feel more tired
- Some redness, soreness, burning, or itching of the skin over the area being treated
- Changes in your breast size and shape
- There may be a period of breast soreness and swelling until the breast fully heals

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy affects everyone differently. Some women have many sexual side effects, some have mild effects, and some women find that chemotherapy does not have any effect on their sex lives.

The general side effects of chemotherapy can include:

- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Weight changes
- Hair loss

These side effects can affect your feelings of attractiveness and interest in having sex.

Some women can also get yeast infections during chemotherapy, which can cause itchiness and burning in and around the vagina.

It is safe to have sex (including intercourse) while you are on chemotherapy. But you should use a condom within 48 hours of each treatment, as some of the chemotherapy drugs can get into vaginal fluids.

It is often best to avoid getting pregnant during treatments for breast cancer. If you wish to become pregnant in the future, discuss your options with your healthcare professional before you start your treatments.

In younger women some chemotherapy drugs can cause hormonal changes that can lead to sexual side effects similar those caused by hormonal therapy described below.

Hormonal therapy

Many breast tumours are “estrogen-sensitive”, meaning that the hormone estrogen helps the tumour to grow. Women with estrogen-sensitive breast cancers will often be treated with hormonal therapy, such as Tamoxifen, or one of a class of drugs called “Aromatase Inhibitors”.

These hormonal therapy drugs help stop the tumour from growing by either lowering the amount of estrogen in the body (Aromatase inhibitors), or by blocking the tumour's ability to use estrogen (Tamoxifen).

Hormonal therapy drugs will often cause symptoms (signs) which are similar to those of menopause. These symptoms may be particularly upsetting for younger women who have not yet gone through menopause naturally. But, these symptoms may not be permanent.

Common symptoms of menopause (either natural or caused by cancer treatment) that can affect your sex life include:

- Hot flashes
- Sleep problems
- Mood swings
- Weight gain
- Vaginal dryness and narrowing (which can make sex painful)

Women who have already gone through menopause prior to cancer may also notice more of these symptoms. Some women notice that menopausal symptoms become worse during hormonal therapy. A lack of estrogen and vaginal dryness can put a woman at greater risk for yeast and urinary tract infections.

Like chemotherapy, hormonal therapies can cause:

- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Vomiting

The side effects from hormonal therapy can make you feel less sexually desirable, lower your interest in sex, and make sex less comfortable and pleasurable.

How to boost your sex drive and increase your sexual pleasure

Communicate:

If you feel or notice upsetting sexual side effects from your breast cancer treatments, talk to a trusted member of your healthcare team. You can talk to your doctor, nurse, social worker, or anyone on your treatment team that you feel comfortable with.

If you have a partner, invite them to join you in these conversations. Partners often have questions, fears and concerns about having sex after breast cancer, or they may worry that your lowered sex drive means that you are no longer attracted to them.

Be open with your partner about how you are feeling so that together you can come up with strategies to make you both feel better. Since certain types of sexual activities and touching may feel different after cancer treatments, let your partner know what feels good and what does not. Practice asking for what you need, want, and enjoy.

If you are feeling negative about your body, or your self-esteem is feeling low, ask your partner to describe your positive and attractive features, and to remind you about all of the qualities that people like about you.

If you are single or dating, you might have concerns about when and how to tell someone who could become your partner about your breast cancer. Support groups through the hospital or in the community can help women get reassurance and support.

Support groups allow women to talk with others who are dealing with similar issues. Ask a member of your healthcare team to help you find a support group that might be right for you.

Challenge your negative thoughts: Your thoughts can make sexual experiences good or bad. Negative feelings about your body or appearance can follow you into the bedroom.

How you are feeling about your own attractiveness can affect your willingness to be intimate with a partner, and your ability to enjoy sexual experiences. You can challenge your negative thoughts in the following ways:

- Remember that you are your own worst critic—others will not judge you nearly as harshly as you judge yourself. Try to see yourself through other people’s eyes.
- Try not to focus so much on the body parts you are missing and the ones you do not like. Instead, focus your attention on the parts that are silky to the touch, sensual and sexy.
- Be more aware of what you tell yourself about how attractive or sexy you are. For each negative thought you have, think of a positive one to balance it. Try to imagine all of the positive things you would say to someone else who looks just like you. Write those kind words down, and say them to yourself.

Plan ahead:

Schedule time for you and your partner to be intimate.

- Some couples like to set aside a “date night”. Planning your intimate time ahead allows you to nurture your intimate relationship and create a relaxed setting for you to be sexual.

Set the mood for intimacy:

Create an environment that is relaxing, comfortable and sensual so that you can set the mood for intimacy:

- Choose lighting (like candles), music, and scents (like perfumes, lotions) that you find calming and romantic.
- If you are missing a breast(s), wearing special bras and breast prostheses (a breast that is artificial, or not real) during sex might make you feel more confident.
- Pick out some beautiful lingerie (sleep wear) that covers your scars and allows you to feel sexy and self-confident.
- It is important to find ways to get your mind “turned on” as well as your genitals. Think about ways that you can move from your regular hectic day into a more relaxed and erotic frame of mind. To help do this, you can:

- Take a warm bubble bath
- Watch a romantic movie
- Read a sexy novel
- Imagine an erotic fantasy

Conserve your energy and reduce fatigue:

Conserving your energy can help you to feel less tired so that you have more energy and desire for sex. Here are some ways you can conserve energy and reduce fatigue:

- Avoid leaving sex for the end of the day when you feel most tired.
- Plan to be sexual at times when you have more energy (such as in the morning, after a nap, on a weekend).
- Get a good night's sleep, and take naps when you can. Let your doctor know if you are having problems with sleep.
- If possible, get some help with housework, grocery shopping, and other chores that are likely to drain your energy.

Eat a healthy diet and get regular exercise: Taking care of your body through eating a healthy diet and exercising will give you more energy. Exercise and healthy eating will also help you to shed the extra pounds that may have been added during your treatments.

Proper nutrition and exercise has been shown to help improve sex drive and sexual pleasure. As you begin to feel stronger, trimmer, and more toned, you may also start to notice improvements in your self-esteem and body image.

Use a vaginal lubricant:

Water-based or silicone-based lubricants can be used during sex to help reduce discomfort caused by vaginal dryness. Lubricants come in a wide variety of options. You can buy them without a prescription at your local pharmacy, or at specialty sex shops.

Look for water-based or silicone-based lubricants that are free of perfumes, glycerin, and parabens that can irritate the vagina.

Massage oils and most oil-based lubricants should not be used for activities involving vaginal penetration, especially if you are using latex condoms. This is because the oils can break down the latex in the condom, making them more likely to break.

Some oils can build-up bacteria and increase your risk of getting yeast or urinary tract infections. For this reason, you should never use petroleum jelly or other non-natural oils in your vagina.

A vaginal moisturizer, such as Replens® or Zestica Moisture®, can be used regularly (2 to 3 times per week) to keep the walls of the vagina moist. This can make sex more comfortable.

For more information about vaginal moisturizers and lubricants, see the UHN Patient Education pamphlet called “Know How to Use Vaginal Moisturizers and Lubricants”.

Get to know your own body—intimately:

Self-pleasuring (also known as masturbation) is a normal and healthy behavior for women of all ages.

Research shows that most women self-pleasure at some point in their lives. It is very common and normal for women to self-pleasure, whether they are single or in a relationship.

Self-pleasuring can create good blood flow to the genitals and keep vaginal tissues healthy.

Cancer treatments can sometimes change “erogenous zones” (areas of your body that are sexually pleasurable) and genital sensations, so learning what feels good through self-touch can help you to experience more pleasure if/when you are with a partner.

Take steps to manage nausea (the feeling of having to throw up) or pain:

If you have been having nausea or pain that interferes with your sexual desire or intimacy, you can try some of these steps:

- If your doctor has prescribed or recommended medications for nausea or pain, it may be helpful to take these medications 1 hour before sex. Taking these medications before sex can help to relieve your nausea and pain symptoms so that sex will feel more comfortable.
- Keep your lubricant in an easy-to-access place so that you have it on hand to reduce pain from vaginal dryness.
- If you are doing activities involving vaginal penetration (such as intercourse), make sure to extend the “foreplay” (kissing, touching, caressing) so that you are feeling aroused before vaginal penetration. Being aroused prepares the vagina for penetration by creating more lubrication and more blood flow to the genitals—this allows for more smooth gliding in and out of the vagina.
- Use pillows to support your body comfortably, and choose positions that allow you to control the depth of penetration and move freely.

Ask your doctor about medication side effects:

Many types of prescription and over-the-counter medications can have sexual side effects. A common sexual side effect of some medications is reduced sex drive. Antidepressants, medications for high blood pressure, and even decongestants and common cold medications can affect your sexual desire and function.

Ask your doctor about the possible sexual side effects of the medications you are taking. It may be possible for your doctor to prescribe or suggest other medications that may have fewer side effects.

If your medications cannot be changed, your doctor may be able to suggest times that you can be intimate when your medications may be at their lowest strength, so the side effects may be fewer.

Do not be afraid to let your doctor know if you think one or more of your medications may be affecting you sexually.

Be playful and change up your sexual routines:

Let your partner know that you would like to experiment with new and exciting ways of pleasuring each other.

You can add fun and excitement to your sex life in many ways:

Try out new ways of touching, kissing, massaging and caressing one another.

- Try different positions of love-making. If you are having a hard time coming up with ideas, visit your local bookstore or specialty sex shop where you will find lots of books with tips on how to spice up your love-life.
- Be playful and talk openly with your partner about what you each like about your sex life and what other new activities you would like to try.
- Remember that intercourse is just one way to be sexual with your partner. It can also be fun and exciting to experiment with “outercourse” (intimate activities that do not involve penetration) with your partner.

Try a sex toy:

Toys add a sense of fun and excitement to any activity—including in the bedroom. There are many sex toys made for a woman’s pleasure.

Vibrating sex toys provide a high level of stimulation that can be very arousing. This high stimulation can be very helpful for women who have decreased lubrication or sensation following their cancer treatment.

Many women find that they are able to become aroused and reach orgasm much more easily using a vibrating sex toy. Becoming aroused creates blood flow to the genitals, which helps maintain healthy vaginal tissues.

Sex toys can be used alone or with a partner.

Work on relationship issues:

The quality of a couple's relationship, especially their communication, can affect their sex life. Cancer can put added stress on couple relationships.

It is important for partners to be able to speak openly and honestly with one another in order to resolve conflicts and work through difficulties. If you and your partner are struggling to overcome problems in your relationship, seek the support of a trained professional.

Sexuality experts are available to help

Cancer experts have different levels of comfort and experience in dealing with issues of intimacy and sexuality. If you and your partner are continuing to have sexual problems in your intimate relationship, do not give up or lose hope. Sexual problems after cancer are very common, and you can get help and support from trained professionals.

Ask a member of your healthcare team for a referral to an expert in sexual counseling. You can also find a registered sex therapist by contacting the Board of Examiners in Sex Therapy and Counseling in Ontario (BESTCO).

The BESTCO website (www.bestco.info) has a therapist directory that allows you to find a list of registered sex therapists in your city and search their profiles.

Some physiotherapists also have specialized training in pelvic health, and they can help you resolve issues related to vaginal pain and tightness. Ask your doctor for a referral to see a physiotherapist, or contact the Ontario Physiotherapy Association at www.physiotherapy.ca.

You can get support and cope with any changes to your body image or sexuality by attending the Princess Margaret's class on Sex & Intimacy. Through this class, a trained sex therapist will give you details on:

- How cancer and its treatment can affect your sex and intimacy
- How to cope with changes
- How to talk to your partner
- How to talk to your healthcare team

To attend this free class, or to get more details, call or visit the website below.

Phone: 416 581 8620

Website: http://www.ellicsr.ca/en/classes_events/classes

Summary

This is a time of difficult emotions and everyone reacts differently. You may be coping well and feeling good about your body and sexuality. But if:

- You, your partner or family are having difficulty coping
- You are concerned about your body image and sexual health after surgery
- You have any other concerns during or after your cancer treatments (radiation treatment or chemotherapy)

Talk to the doctors, nurses, social workers, and other healthcare staff at the Princess Margaret's Breast Clinic. They are available to help and provide support and assistance to you and your family.

Resources and contact information

The Princess Margaret's Psychosocial Oncology Program

The Psychosocial Oncology Program at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre can provide patients and family members with social, emotional, psychological and practical support.

Princess Margaret Cancer Centre, 16th Floor

Phone: 416 946 4525

Mount Sinai Hospital's Psychosocial Support Program

The Psychosocial Support Program at Mount Sinai Hospital can provide you with social, emotional, psychological and practical support.

Mount Sinai Hospital, 12th Floor

Phone: 416 586 4800 Ext. 5201

The Princess Margaret's Cancer Rehabilitation and Survivorship Program

At the Cancer Rehabilitation and Survivorship Program at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre, you will find support, access physical rehabilitation services and gain information that will help you throughout your cancer journey.

Phone: 416 946 4501 Ext. 2363

Website: www.survivorship.ca

Board of Examiners in Sex Therapy & Counseling in Ontario

This is an organization of experts in the field of sexual health and registered sex therapists in Ontario. Information is available on the website about what happens in sex therapy and how to find a therapist near you. Sex therapy services are usually not covered by OHIP, but may be covered by some extended health benefits.

Phone: 416 204 0336

Website: www.bestco.info

Ontario Physiotherapy Association (OPA)

The Ontario Physiotherapy Association has a listing of physiotherapists who have training and expertise in pelvic health and rehabilitation.

Website: www.physiotherapy.ca

Canadian Cancer Society – Peer Support Services

The Peer Support Services connect people with cancer one-on-one with trained cancer survivors who:

- listen
- provide hope
- offer comfort
- share ideas on how to cope

This free-of-cost service can give you the unique details and support you need. It matches every person with a suitable volunteer based on their type of cancer, sex, language and lifestyle.

Phone: 416 961 7223

Website: www.cancer.ca

More information

There are library resources you can use to get more information. You will find breast cancer-related books, pamphlets, videos and other resources.

- Princess Margaret – Breast Cancer Resource Room (M. Lau Breast Centre, 2nd floor)
- Princess Margaret Patient & Family Library (Main Floor Atrium)
- Mount Sinai Hospital – The Marvella Koffler Breast Centre (12th Floor)

Visit www.uhnpatienteducation.ca for more health information. The development of patient education resources is supported by the Princess Margaret Cancer Foundation.

Contact us to provide feedback or request this brochure in a different format, such as large print or electronic formats: pfep@uhn.ca

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Form: D-5822 | Author: Terry Cheng, Robin Forbes, Trisha Woodhead, and Kelli Young | Revised: 05/2019