

Intimacy, sexuality and breast cancer

In a perfect world, every relationship would provide the intimacy and sexuality a woman needs to feel happy and secure all the time. In the real world, breast cancer can sometimes make it difficult to be sexual or intimate with another person. At times, you may only want intimacy from your relationship. At other times, you may want both, or neither. That's okay and quite natural. Both can enrich your life and bring closeness to your relationship.

Breast cancer does not have to mean the end of sexuality and intimacy. Rather, it can be a new beginning.



How to talk with your partner

If it was hard for you and your partner to talk about your feelings about sex before you got breast cancer, it will probably still be difficult. While there is no such thing as the perfect time to talk, some times are better than others. Choose a moment when you are alone and relaxed. When you feel comfortable, give yourself and your partner permission to talk about your feelings, both good and bad. Above all else, be honest. Talking about each other's fears allows you to reassure each other. You may want to try talking about:

- **Your biggest fears** — You may be afraid your partner will reject or leave you because of your breast cancer. You may not feel pretty or worry that your partner finds you less attractive.
- **Your partner's fears** — Your partner may be afraid of physically hurting you during sex. Partners may be confused or unsure of the best way to show support and affection. They may retreat or wait for cues from you about when to resume an intimate or sexual relationship.
- **Birth control** — You should not get pregnant. Treatments such as radiation or chemotherapy, and tamoxifen can cause birth defects. It's important to talk to your partner about birth control. After treatment, do not assume that you can no longer become pregnant.
- **Your "new" sex life** — Breast cancer may change what you like to do and how you like to be touched during sex. You may not even want to have sex for a while. Your partner may not realize this unless you talk about it. You may find your partner is willing to do anything that will make you happy.

Why don't you...

Get romantic

Bring some romance back into your life. Plan a candlelight dinner. Take a bubble bath. Take the time to nurture your sexuality.

Go slow

Who says you need to have intercourse every time you feel sexual? Kissing and touching can provide just as much pleasure.

Get comfortable

Sex may be painful if you do not have as much natural lubrication as you did before. Try using a water-based lubricant like Astroglide® or KY Jelly® just before sex.

To help with vaginal dryness, try an estrogen-free vaginal moisturizer (such as Replens). These products are available over the counter (without a prescription). Since they do not contain estrogen, they're safe for breast cancer survivors. If vaginal dryness is still a problem, contact your doctor. They may be able to give you a prescription for something that will help.

Do something different

Change your sexual routine. Try new things. Have some fun.

Get some advice

Consider seeking advice from a marriage counselor, sex therapist or joining a support group. You can go with your partner or by yourself.

Share this list of ideas with your partner. Getting the intimacy and sexuality you need should not be your responsibility alone.

Looking in the mirror

Breast cancer may change the way you look. It can also change the way you feel about your self-image. While most women agree that their breasts are only part of what defines them as a woman, they may still be deeply affected by the change in or loss of their breast(s).

A woman's breasts symbolize so many things — motherhood, sexuality and just being a woman. But for some women, breasts also now represent cancer. Most women, and their partners, will need to take time to grieve the loss of (or changes in) their breast(s).

Joining a support group may help you cope with all the changes in your body and self-image. Some women find these changes difficult, others find strength in their new image of themselves. Remind yourself that healing takes time. At some point, you will become more comfortable with your body. Accepting yourself as you are is all part of the process.

Resources

Susan G. Komen®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

American Association of Sexuality Educators,
Counselors and Therapists (AASECT)
202-449-1099
www.aasect.org

International Society for the Study of Women's
Sexual Health (ISSWSH)
847-517-7225
www.isswsh.org

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Cancer Resources
- Getting the Support You Need
- Talking With Your Partner

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