

## Sexual Health and Cancer

Sexual health is the state of well-being that focuses on our feelings about our own sexuality, and may include the physical, emotional and cultural aspects of sexual well-being.

### *What is sexuality?*

Sexuality may include:

- Our bodies
- The act of sex
- Our sexual orientation
- Gender identity (male or female)
- Our values about life, love and the people in our lives

### *Will my sexual desire change as I go through cancer treatments?*

You may notice a change in your sexual desire during cancer treatment. This may be due to:

- Pain
- Fatigue
- Changes in hormones
- Depression and anxiety
- Changes in your self-image

### *How can I express intimacy without sexual intercourse?*

Love and affection can be expressed in many ways.

- Kissing
- Hugging
- Fondling
- Cuddling
- Touching
- Holding hands

*Sexual health often is a concern for patients undergoing cancer treatment.*

***What should I do if I want to have sex with my spouse/partner?***

Talk to your doctor or nurse to see if it is all right to engage in sexual acts during active cancer treatment.

***Questions to ask your doctor or nurse during cancer treatment:***

- When can I have sex?
- What can I expect?
- What can I do to protect myself and my partner during sex?
- Are there any restrictions on sexual activity during or after treatment?

***Precautions during sexual activity:***

- Use a barrier contraceptive, such as condoms. This prevents exchange of body fluids. During cancer treatment, semen and vaginal fluids may contain chemotherapy by-products. Barrier methods also help prevent the spread of STDs (sexually transmitted diseases).
- Use two forms of protection to prevent pregnancy. Chemotherapy may affect male semen and female eggs. Medicines you are taking may be harmful to a developing fetus. Talk to your doctor or nurse about birth control methods (e.g., condoms, spermicide, diaphragms and cervical caps).
- Before having intercourse, your neutrophil count should be over 2,000 cells/mm<sup>3</sup>. If your counts are lower than this, talk to your doctor or nurse. A low neutrophil count increases your risk for infection. When your white blood cell count is very low, the pressure of sex may cause bacteria from the vagina or rectal areas to get into the bloodstream. You may get sick if this happens. To help prevent this from occurring, it is recommended that you wash your genitals before and after sex.
- Before having intercourse, your platelet count should be above 50,000 cells/mm<sup>3</sup>. When your platelet count is low, you have a greater risk for bleeding.
- To promote hygiene during sexual acts:
  - Wash hands before and after sexual activity
  - Avoid rectal intercourse, which can increase your risk of infection and risk of bleeding
- Avoid excessive friction during intercourse by using a water-based lubricant such as K-Y Jelly<sup>®</sup> or Astroglide<sup>®</sup>. Do not use petroleum-based jellies or lubricants.
- Report any unusual pain, fever, bleeding or discharge to your doctor or nurse.

***Important signs and symptoms to report to your doctor or nurse:***

- Changes in sexual drive
- Men: Genital pain, pain during erection and/or ejaculation or problems having an erection
- Women: Dryness in the vagina, unusual discharge from your vagina, hot flashes, pain during sex, discomfort, bleeding during or after intercourse

***Tips to promote sexual health:***

- Be responsible
- Get professional help when needed
- Talk with your healthcare provider
- Talk to your partner about your feelings
- Take time for intimacy other than intercourse
- Keep an open mind about ways to feel sexual pleasure
- Focus on your physical recovery first. It's OK not to have sex.

For more information, please call the Sexual Health Program at 312-926-4032. Trained nurses (both male and female) are available to assist you with your sexual concerns.

**Health Information Resources**

For more information, visit one of Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Health Learning Centers. These state-of-the-art health libraries are located on the third floor of the Galter Pavilion and on the first floor of the Prentice Women's Hospital. Health information professionals are available to help you find the information you need and provide you with personalized support at no charge. You may contact the Health Learning Centers by calling 312-926-LINK (5465) or by sending an e-mail to [hlc@nmh.org](mailto:hlc@nmh.org).

For additional information about Northwestern Memorial Hospital, please visit our Web site at [www.nmh.org](http://www.nmh.org).

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