

cancer answers

Cancer Answers is a series of free public lectures, presented by *Cancer Care Nova Scotia*, on a variety of cancer-related topics. The lectures, delivered by cancer experts, are designed to raise awareness and educate participants about issues related to prevention, screening, early diagnosis, treatment, survivorship and palliative care.

Following each lecture, the presentations are posted on the *Cancer Care Nova Scotia* website.



Men, Cancer & Sexuality
**What you and your
partner might want to
know ...**



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Sexual Concerns are Common

- Up to 50% of people affected by cancer have one or more sexual concerns and many of these persist for years after treatment
- In addition, sexual problems are not uncommon in the general population



Cancer & Sexuality

- Most cancer treatments have some impact on sexuality – physical, psychological, emotional & relational
- Patient satisfaction surveys suggest that 40-50% of people affected by cancer are dissatisfied with how their sexual concerns are addressed
- However, less than 10% of those speak to their health professionals about their concerns

What *is* the role of health professionals?

- In one study*, 96% of health professionals said that sexual concerns were within their domain of practice
- BUT only 2% regularly asked about sexual concerns

* *Hautamaki et al., 2007*



How does cancer affect men's sexuality?

All cancers have the potential to:

- Deplete energy, including energy for sex
- Cause pain
- Create dependency on others (physical, financial)
- Affect how we see our body (weak, faulty, sick)
- All of which can contribute to a decreased sense of self esteem & sex appeal



How does cancer affect men's sexuality?

All cancers have the potential to:

- Challenge one's sense of oneself as a man (the stereotypical masculine model . . . strong, virile, invincible, in charge, independent)
- Create losses (visible and invisible) and grief
- For younger people, disrupt normal psychosexual development and fertility
- For single people, create anxiety about new relationships



Psychological & emotional effects of sexual problems

- While sexual concerns are not a problem for all, for some unresolved problems can be devastating to both the man and his partner
- Effects can range from feelings of embarrassment & shame to humiliation, erosion of relationships and more complicated mental health problems



**“ . . . You question your
masculinity, you question
your worth.” (patient)**

Phillips et al., 2000



Impact on relationships

- For those who are in a romantic relationship there are some common scenarios that can develop. One is that the man withdraws, is silent or irritable, while the partner pursues in an attempt to help.
- Partners can also eventually withdraw as misunderstandings accumulate

“As far as I know [it does not bother her]... now if she had said something...but if it is, she hasn't said anything. It could be bothering her, but she hasn't said anything.”

Research participant – Boehmer & Clarke, 2001



I wait for him to make the first move. I want to be physically affectionate but I don't want him to feel pressured or to push it in his face that he can't get an erection. That's not the important part for me but I don't want him to feel bad.



5 Common Problems *(and what to do about them)*

- Erectile problems
- Loss of interest or desire
- Difficulty with orgasm
- Altered Body Image
- Incontinence



Erectile Dysfunction (ED)

- Erectile dysfunction is common in older men; as men age they generally experience an occasional or frequent inability to obtain an erection stiff enough for penetrative sex
- Erections also do not last as long typically; however the key predictor of life long sexual activity is attitude and general health

Erectile Dysfunction (ED)

- The most common cancer related causes of ED are surgical damage to nerves (prostate cancer surgeries) and radiation effects (any cancer radiated in the pelvis).
- Approximately 50% of men treated for prostate cancer will experience persistent ED post surgery

Alternatives

- PDE-5 inhibitors (e.g. Viagra)
- Vacuum erection device
- Penile injection therapy
- Penile prosthesis
- Sex toys (e.g. dildo & harness)

However . . .

In the context of longer term ED, couples may need to expand their sexual repertoire sufficiently that they can have satisfying sex whether or not an erection shows up. This probably requires saying a sad goodbye to one's past sex life and developing a new one. Just like the first time around, this takes patience, good communication, practice and an open mind!



Loss of Desire

- Can occur at any time in the illness
- May be temporary or enduring
- Common with androgen deprivation therapies (high risk or advanced prostate cancer)

A word about ADT . . .

- In North America there are ~ 500,000 men receiving androgen deprivation therapies
- The effects of long term ADT are pervasive physically, sexually, relationally and emotionally
- In general, health care professionals underestimate the impact on men; as a result men and their partners receive too little assistance in this area
- One very important need is for greater education for men and their partners



What to do about loss of desire

- Recognize that everyone needs touch and affection . . . begin there
- Expressing affection physically does not require that one continue on . . .
- Think of sex as a meal . . . sometimes you want just the appetizer



What to do about loss of desire

- On the other hand . . .
L'appetit vient en mangeant (Appetite comes while we are eating)
- If someone is on ADT, the partner will need to be the initiator
- If ED is an issue, think about the *Christmas Light Analogy**
- Communication is critical

*Robinson & Lounsberry, 2010



Difficulty with orgasm

Several reasons why orgasm may be a problem, for example:

- Lack of desire
- Impact of surgery, which can cause orgasmic pain
- Loss of a prostate gland (which contributes ejaculate and sensation during orgasm)

What to do about orgasms?

- In the case of ED, experiment to discover how to achieve orgasm with a soft penis
- In the case of significant pelvic floor pain, Kegel exercises and/or a physiotherapist who specializes in pelvic floor muscles can be very helpful

Body Image

- Men are probably as troubled about body changes as are women but there are not many studies
- When these are significant they can seriously hamper desire for sex
- Body image issues arise with any significant change to our bodies – we can feel alienated, embarrassed, ashamed or even repulsed
- Most body image concerns improve with time – there is a need to gradually make friends with a changed body and to positively reframe the meaning of the change



Incontinence

(involuntary leaking of urine)

- Most commonly associated with surgery for prostate cancer or pelvic radiation
- While it typically improves over months or even years, for some men it never entirely goes away
- It is often worse with straining, during sex or with alcohol/caffeine
- For many men it can be a huge barrier to sex

What to do about incontinence?

- Urine is sterile and so the issue is more about aesthetics/cosmetics than harm
- To control /manage the incontinence during sex consider the following:
 - Empty bladder & minimize fluids in advance of sex
 - Consider shower sex
 - If erectile function is good, use a condom
 - Consider using a constrictor band at the base of the penis
 - Talk to your partner!! Towels may be a simple solution

Men and Health

- Men are typically not socialized to look after their health
- Rather, they are socialized to “tough it out”
- Many men are stoics. They tend not to talk things over with their friends or their partners
- Many men withdraw in silence while partners frantically try to figure out how to help. Don't imagine your partner is not affected by changes . . . they most definitely are!



A word about communication .

The only answer to sexual concerns is to talk, talk and talk some more!!

If you can't talk (or feel stuck) see a professional counselor.



Where to get help

- Internet resources. Explore the websites of reliable sources like the CCS /ACS, and cancer specific support groups
- Online support Cancer Chat Canada (www.cancerchatcanada.ca)
- There are professionals available to help – speak to your physician or nurse.

