

Sex and intimacy

Sex and intimacy are an important part of life for many people. You do not have to be in a relationship or having sex to have questions or need support.

Cancer and cancer treatment can affect many areas of sexual well-being. They may cause changes that are:

- Physical – you may have side effects or symptoms that change how your body works or looks. This could include problems getting or keeping an erection, or changes to the vagina.
- Emotional – you may be dealing with stress, worry or other difficult feelings.
- Practical – your usual routines or roles may change.

Many changes caused by cancer treatment are temporary and usually get better after treatment finishes. As you recover, you may find your sex life goes back to the way it was. Sometimes you may have to adjust to changes that last longer, or are permanent.

There can be ways to improve your sexual well-being and to manage any problems. But sometimes this gets forgotten because there are other things to cope with when you have cancer.

Things to consider

- It can be difficult to start a conversation about sex with someone from your healthcare team. You may feel embarrassed or uncomfortable talking about something so personal. But it is important to get the right information when you need it. You can ask your healthcare team about anything before, during or after cancer treatment.
- You may worry about whether it is safe to have sex. Sexual touching, penetration or close physical contact cannot pass cancer onto a partner. It will not affect the cancer and does not make cancer more likely to come back. If you feel like having sex, then it is usually safe to do so.
- Your cancer doctor or nurse will tell you if you need to make changes to your sex life because of a treatment. They can also help you cope with side effects.
- Do not put pressure on yourself to have sex or be intimate with a partner. You may not feel interested in, or ready to have, sex for a time before, during or after treatment.
- If you have sex during cancer treatment, it is important to use contraception to prevent a pregnancy. Some cancer treatments can be harmful to an unborn baby.
- It is also important to protect your partner, as small amounts of chemotherapy, or other drugs, can get into your body fluids. Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse can tell you what type of protection you should use.
- If your sexual well-being is affected before, during or after cancer treatment, it does not mean your sex life is over. Talk to your GP, cancer doctor, specialist nurse or your local sexual health service. They may offer advice or treatments that can help you. Or they may suggest you see someone else if you need more help.
- Sometimes it helps to talk about sexual problems. Your healthcare team may arrange for you to talk to a counsellor, psychologist, psychiatrist or sex therapist. These professionals work in slightly different ways. But they can all help you understand and cope with your feelings or any changes.

Local resources:

Resource	Contact details

National resources:

Resource	Contact details
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists (COSRT) • LGBT Foundation • Sexual Advice Association 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • www.cosrt.org.uk • www.lgbt.foundation Tel 0345 330 3030 Email info@lgbt.foundation • www.sexualadviceassociation.co.uk

Further information

macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/treatment/coping-with-treatment/your-sex-life

Our booklets and leaflets are available to order free on be.macmillan.org.uk

- **Cancer and your sex life**
- **Cancer and relationships: Support for partners, families and friends**
- **How are you feeling? The emotional effects of cancer**

More information and support

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm, or visit macmillan.org.uk

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app. Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

We produce information in a range of formats and languages. To order these, visit macmillan.org.uk/otherformats or call our support line.