

Sex and intimacy

Sex and intimacy are an important part of life for many people. Even if you are not in a relationship or having sex, you may still have questions or need support.

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

- 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, bladder or bowel. Or you may [feel too tired](#) for sex.
- [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 ends. 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 are many ways to [improve your sexual well-being](#) and to manage any problems.

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.

Tips for dealing with sex and intimacy problems

- 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, it is usually safe to do so.
- Your cancer team will tell you if you need to make changes to your sex life because of 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 or ready to have sex for a time before, during or after treatment. Sex involves different things for different people. If you do not feel like doing what you would normally do, there are other ways to be intimate.
- 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 team can tell you what type of protection you should use.
- If your sexual well-being is affected, it does not mean your sex life is over. Talk to your GP, cancer team or your local sexual health service. They may offer advice or treatments to help. Or they may suggest you see someone else if you need more help.
- If you are having [problems with erections](#), there are medications and aids that can help.
- If you are having problems with [vaginal changes](#), lubrications and moisturisers can help.
- It may help 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.

Macmillan Cancer Support resources

We have more information on our [website](#), including audiobooks. Or you can order our free booklets and leaflets on be.macmillan.org.uk such as:

- [Body image and cancer](#)
- [Cancer and relationships](#)
- [Cancer and your sex life](#)
- [Your sex life and cancer – easy read.](#)

We produce information in a [range of formats](#) and [languages](#). To order these, visit our website or call our support line.

Help to Overcome Problems Effectively (HOPE) is a course to help people after cancer treatment. It is a free 6-week self-management course that is run online. It was developed by Hope for the Community and Macmillan Cancer Support. To find out more, visit macmillan.org.uk/hope-programme

Further Macmillan 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 where you can [chat online](#) to one of our team.

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

Or if you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our [Online Community](#). Our free [Macmillan Buddy service](#) can arrange weekly calls or visits with a friendly volunteer who understands what you're going through.

Other useful contact details

- College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists – visit cosrt.org.uk
- LGBT Foundation – visit lgbt.foundation
- Relate – visit relate.org.uk

Notes and questions
