



# Sexuality and Intimacy During and After Cancer

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DR. STEPHANIE BUEHLER

800-769-0342



# First Cancer, then Sex

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- Reaction to bad news (Kubler-Ross)
  - Denial/shock, anger, bargaining, depression, resolution/acceptance
- Demands of treatment
- Coping with change
  - Image of oneself as a healthy person
  - Seeing the body as vulnerable
  - Facing one's mortality
- Reclaiming your sex life may be a big part of your recovery



# Why Talk about Sex and Cancer?

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- More people are surviving cancer
- Sexual health is important to wellbeing
- Any kind of cancer can affect sexuality and relationships



# You after Cancer

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- Accepting change
  - Hormones
  - Bodily function
  - Scarring, hair loss, disfigurement
- Accepting the body's timeline
  - Your body, heart, and mind may heal at different rates
  - Be patient with yourself

# Talking about Sex and Cancer...

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- Can improve psychological adjustment to having had cancer
- Strengthen the primary relationship and therefore social support
- Improve the quality of life overall





# What Kinds of Cancer Causes Problems?

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- Usually, we think of cancers that have a direct effect on reproductive organs
  - Breast and gynecological cancers for women
  - Prostate cancer for men
- But any kind of cancer can cause problems



# Relationship Changes

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- Role reversal
  - Provider; planner; caregiver; housekeeper; chef; primary parent
- “Medicalization” of relationship and the home
- Emotional enmeshment or distance
- Some couples feel strengthened by the experience
- Sadly, some find cancer strains their relationship
  - Seek help if you are struggling

# Sexual Problems Caused by Cancer

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# Women may experience...

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- Change in sex drive
- Reduced vaginal lubrication
- Early menopause
- Painful intercourse (dyspareunia)
- Change in body image
- Dissatisfaction with intimate relationship



# Men may experience...

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- Change in ejaculation
- Erectile problems (ED)
- Change in orgasm
- Urinary incontinence
- Image of oneself as a man
- Low self worth
- Change in sexual confidence

# What Helps?

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1. Open communication about sex
2. Seeing the value of sex and intimacy
3. View of sex as more than penis-vagina intercourse



Perz, Ussher, & Gilbert (2013). *BMC Cancer*.



# Open Communication

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- With oneself
  - Don't deny that there is a problem
  - Continue to see yourself as a sexual being
- With one's partner
  - Identify what problems you are having
  - Keep trying different "scripts" to find one that works
- With the medical providers
  - Don't be embarrassed; sexual problems are common
  - Ask for suggestions
  - A referral to a sex therapist does not mean you are "crazy"

# Acknowledge the Value of Sex

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- Vitality
- Feeling like a woman or a man
- Communicating feelings that are hard to put in words
- Satisfying the need for touch





# Redefining “Sex”

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- “Sex,” or intercourse..
  - ...Requires energy, stamina, and a working reproductive system
- Non-intercourse forms of pleasure or “outercourse” ...
  - ...Requires less energy and stamina
- Outercourse can be more intimate, not less

# Specific Suggestions

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Fall 1,000 times, get up 1,001.



# Sex Drive

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- Acceptance that drive may never return to pre-cancer levels
- Identify different reasons to have sex
  - Closeness, intimacy, feeling normal, being touched, giving and receiving love
- Plan for sex
  - Couples that schedule sex have sex more frequently
  - Being intentional need not diminish the experience



# Lube!

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- Always use lubricant
  - Silicon-based: Uber Lube, Astroglide Premium Lubricant (do not use on toys)
  - Water-based: Slippery Stuff, Astroglide (may need to reapply)
- Oils may be hard for the body to clear
- Ask your physician about...
  - Moisturizers, e.g., Replens
  - Topical estrogen cream or ring (e.g., Est-ring)
  - Vaginal laser treatment



# Painful Intercourse

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- Lubrication
- Consult with physician
  - Estrogen, both topical and systemic
  - Referral to pelvic floor physical therapist
- Try “digital dilation” and small toys or dilators first
- Stop having intercourse until problem is resolved
  - “Fear-avoidance” cycle



# Arousal

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- Relax before sexual activity with a nap, bath, massage, listen to music, etc.
- Minimize distraction; music can be helpful
- Increase time for foreplay
- Consider adding sexual aids especially vibrators
- Accept that your body has changed; what used to work may work no longer



# ED (Erectile Dysfunction)

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- Allow yourself time to heal
- Banish negative thoughts like, “I am not a man unless I can get a natural erection,” and “It is embarrassing not to have a natural erection.”
- Men can have orgasms without erections after prostate cancer
- It isn’t critical to have a firm erection to have sexual enjoyment



# Using Medications

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- Generally accepted that injection is the best course of treatment after prostate cancer because it works
- Oral medications should be taken therapeutically as prescribed by your physician
- Talk to partner openly about how to incorporate the use of medications into your sex life



# Improving Effect of Meds

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- Be relaxed in your approach to having sex
- Be kind to yourself and have realistic expectations
- Get good at other types of sex
  - “She Comes First” by Ian Kerner
- Be persistent
- Allow time for body to heal
  - This may not be the time for “mind over body”



# “Outercourse”

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- Try different kinds of kissing
- Discover erogenous zones
- Use fingers for stimulation
- Rubbing bodies and genitals
- Oral sex
- Try toys
- Try different lubricants
- Incorporate pleasant scents, lighting



# How to Talk about Sex

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- Don't give feedback about sex immediately after
- Do sit some place neutral to talk, e.g., the sofa
- Talk about what feels good and is working first
- Then give a short, assertive statement about what you need
- Repeat what feels good
- Ask partner for any feedback as well



# What About Sex Therapy?

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- What is a sex therapist?
  - Licensed mental health professional
  - Ideally has additional training and AASECT certification
- What happens in sex therapy?
  - Sex therapy is “talk therapy” with no touching or disrobing
  - Identify the problem or problems
  - Provide information, suggestions, activities, reading
  - Intensive therapy for longstanding or difficult problems



# When to Consult a Sex Therapist

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- One or both of you are avoiding the topic of sex
- You have been fighting about sex
- You have tried several things to make sex better but nothing seems to be working
- When talking about sex is very embarrassing or difficult
- When you are not having sex because you are not getting along
- When you have questions about sex and don't know where to turn



# Questions?

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**Dr. Stephanie Buehler**

Licensed Psychologist / AASECT Sex Therapist  
Author, *What Every Mental Health Professional  
Needs to Know about Sex*

*[Dr.StephanieBuehler@gmail.com](mailto:Dr.StephanieBuehler@gmail.com)*

**800-769-0342**