SEXUALITY AND INTIMACY AFTER BREAST CANCER
(A FRANK DISCUSSION ABOUT A SENSITIVE TOPIC)

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One study presented at the American Society of Clinical Oncology Annual Meeting found that while women’s sexual function declined over 6 months of postsurgical treatment, it rebounded 6 months later.¹

When you were first diagnosed with breast cancer, it’s doubtful that your sex life was a top priority. Trying to figure out your treatment options and coping with this sudden and dramatic change to your life likely took center stage.

Now that you’re further along in your treatment, issues of intimacy and sex may be of more importance to you. And that’s natural. But the experience of having breast cancer and how it affects you – both physically and emotionally – can affect your sex life in many ways. We’ll explore some of the more common physical and emotional issues, and offer some ideas on what you can do to resume – and maintain – a healthy sexual life.

Some good news: Research has shown that after the first 6 months of adjuvant treatment, the majority of women with breast cancer have been able to resume satisfying sexual lives. Of course, every woman’s experience is different. What kind of surgery you had, whether you had or are having reconstructive surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation administration, and whether or not you are taking hormonal medications – these are all factors that may affect your body image and how you feel physically.

However, many researchers and health care professionals agree that women who had a positive body image and satisfying sex life before their breast cancer diagnosis are more likely to resume enjoyment of their sex lives after their diagnosis.

Being diagnosed with breast cancer and going through the various stages of treatment can take its toll on your overall energy levels. When it comes to sex, it may take you longer to become interested, if you feel any interest at all.

Some breast cancer treatments can cause sexual side effects. First of all, there’s the pain and discomfort of surgery. Chemotherapy may lead to nausea and deplete your energy. It can even cause vaginal ulcers, which can make intercourse painful. Chemotherapy, along with hormonal treatments, can hasten menopause and the symptoms that go with it. Loss of libido (sex drive), vaginal discomfort and dryness, and hot flashes are all possibilities.

Common sexual side effects

- Difficulty reaching climax
- Loss of desire for sex
- Pain during sex
- Reduced size of the vagina
- Vaginal dryness

Fortunately, there are treatments that may help with sexual side effects. For vaginal dryness or discomfort, try using a water-based lubricant or moisturizer designated for vaginal use. These can be bought over the counter at your local pharmacy. You may also want to ask your doctor about low-dose hormonal creams, which can help restore the lining of the vagina. Your doctor can help you decide if these creams are appropriate if you’re on hormonal treatment.

Your doctor, nurse, or other health care professionals may suggest other ways that may help manage or lessen side effects such as hot flashes and lowered libido. While sex can be an uncomfortable or sensitive topic, you have the right to seek information from health care professionals and know your options.
The anxiety, depression, and stress that often come with a breast cancer diagnosis may decrease, or flat-out eliminate, your interest in sex. Not to mention the body image issues, such as scarring, that can come with surgery.

Studies show that what partners mostly care about is that their loved one is alive and feeling well. In comparison, physical changes are of less importance. Even if your relationship is very strong, you and your partner will have to cope with the effects of your diagnosis and treatments.
Even though sex is a familiar topic, when it comes to issues of sex and intimacy, communication is crucial. Talk openly with your partner about how you’re feeling. If you’re not in the mood for intercourse for a while, your partner will probably understand. There are other forms of intimacy, such as kissing, hugging, or giving each other a back or foot massage, that may help you keep close.

Talk about your biggest fears. Women may be afraid their partner will leave or reject them. Your partner may be afraid of physically hurting you during sex. Discussing your thoughts and feelings can help you reassure each other that you are both aware and sensitive to the other’s concerns.

Once you are ready to go further, try new things. Breast cancer may change what you like to do and how you like to be touched. You may find that your partner is willing to do what will make you happy – and vice versa.
Women who are not in a relationship at the time of their diagnosis and treatment have a different kind of challenge. They may worry about how having breast cancer might affect their prospects of meeting someone – and about how and when to broach the topic when starting a new relationship. Remember this – you don’t have to bring it up until you’re comfortable and ready to do so.

Breast cancer has become so common that many people have someone close in their life who has dealt with the disease. There’s no way to predict how any individual person will respond, but there is no doubt that many people are supportive and prepared to continue the relationship.
Issues surrounding sexuality and intimacy are faced by virtually every woman who has had breast cancer at some point. How each woman approaches them is different. In this pamphlet, we’ve listed several books and Web sites that provide more information. We also encourage you to have discussions with a health care professional with whom you feel comfortable. You might also consider a support group or a counselor who specializes in these issues.

We hope you find this information and the suggested resources valuable and relevant. Enjoying and expressing your sexuality is a healthy and normal part of life. And as someone who’s been through a tough time, you deserve all the enjoyment that life can offer.

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Want to learn more?

Here are some books and Web sites that can provide further information and support:


*Sexuality & Cancer for the Woman Who Has Cancer and Her Partner*, by the American Cancer Society. 2001.


Breastcancer.org
On the Home Page, click on “Sex and Intimacy.”

Komen.org
On the Home Page, search under “Sexuality and Intimacy.”

Y-me.org
On the Home Page, go to “Coping and Quality of Life” and click on “Intimacy.”

Cancer.org
On the Home Page, search for the article “Sexual Impact Following Breast Cancer Treatment.”