Depression

It is estimated that approximately 15% to 25 % of people dealing with cancer will also experience depression. Carers, relatives and friends may also suffer from depression. For anyone who thinks they maybe experiencing depression it is important to inform a health professional. There are a range of effective treatments.

Where to Go For Help

If you have any concerns then please discuss them with your doctor or other health professionals.

Additional support :

- ***Impotence Australia:*** (counselling for sexual and relationship issues): 1800 800 614 www.impotenceaustralia.com.au
- ***Cancer Council:*** 1800 650 960 www.cancercouncil.com.au
- ***Beyond Blue:*** (the national depression initiative) www.beyondblue.org.au
- ***Andrology Australia:*** (information about male sexual conditions) www.andologyaustralia.org

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The content of this document has been compiled by the following experts using available medical evidence and should be used as guide only. Treatment advice specific to your situation should be sought from your doctor.

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Breast Cancer & Sexuality

Breast Cancer

Being told you have cancer can be a terrible shock; there is much new information to take on board and many decisions to be made about treatment.
In addition to the emotional turmoil you may have to cope with physical changes resulting from treatments (surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and hormone therapy etc) such as exhaustion, weight gain or loss, nausea and pain, together with challenges associated with body image. Some of these changes will be short-lived whilst others may be permanent.
It's little wonder then that a diagnosis of breast cancer and subsequent treatment can play havoc with your sex life! And it's easy to see how intimacy issues might be overlooked. However, for many people, maintaining sexual intimacy is an essential part of their recovery process. Regardless of your sexual preference or relationship status it is important not to let breast cancer define who you are. And remember intimacy means being physically and emotionally close – it doesn't have to result in intercourse.
This booklet is designed to help you manage the physical and emotional effects of breast cancer on your life. Addressing these issues early will help you and your partner adjust more quickly. It is likely cancer, and its treatment, will impact on your sex life. It doesn't mean it's over, although some women will chose to leave a bad relationship rather than 'waste precious time', but it's a good idea to prepare for the challenges ahead.
It may feel like you are on a roller coaster and you, and your partner, will need to allow for fluctuating emotions and desires in response to these changes and to remind each other about all the other attractive qualities that bind you such as humour, intelligence etc.

Communication

Remember you are facing a crisis and good communication is more important than ever. It will help to talk with your partner, if you have one, as well as to other cancer survivors and professionals such as doctors, sex therapists and counsellors.
The best time to discuss the effects of breast cancer treatments on your sex life is before you begin treatment. If you have a partner it's a good idea to visit the doctor together to explore treatment options and to talk about what you might expect. It's important to find the time and a safe place to talk. Take turns in expressing feelings, starting with the small stuff.

Explore how you both feel about the changes you will experience so that you can share your anxieties and discuss how you can support each other and where else you can find help.
Of course, if you were experiencing problems before treatment it's likely the cancer will expose cracks in the relationship. However many people in loving relationships find themselves forging even greater bonds of intimacy and acceptance as they deal with the challenge cancer brings

Changes in Sex Life

Faced with breast cancer many women report not only having less sex but wanting it less! A drop in desire is hardly surprising given the physical and psychological toll cancer, and its treatment can take. Whilst being sensual you may discover various changes to your body some of which are discussed below:

1. Loss of Libido.

Dullness of response is VERY common and you may find it takes longer to get aroused and to reach orgasm. In addition pain, anti-nausea drugs and anti-depressants can reduce libido and can even result in temporary aversion to sex.
When resuming intimate relations it might be a good idea to refrain from sexual intercourse and focus on getting to know each other's bodies again through cuddling, kissing, touching etc. Take time to rebuild confidence and to adapt to bodily changes before moving on to sexual intercourse. During this time you may find you are experiencing vaginal dryness; an over-the-counter lubricant will help arousal by relaxing the vagina and making penetration easier and more pleasurable.

2. Pain Due to Treatment .

Besides pain to the breast area from treatment many women also experience vaginal pain. Sometimes chemotherapy can cause short-term ulcers in the mouth, throat, vagina and rectum. These will go but can be uncomfortable and unpleasant. Steroids and antibiotics can cause yeast infections in the mouth and vagina and some women experience genital herpes as a result of their weakened immune system.

3. Sudden-onset Menopause.

Medications used to reduce estrogen or to block its actions such as Tamoxifen and Arimidex therapy, or the end of hormone replacement therapy, can trigger early menopause and this can cause thinning and shortening of the vaginal walls and sometimes make sex uncomfortable.

For many women lack of vaginal lubrication is an unpleasant side effect. Over-the counter lubricants such as Replens, olive oil, yoghurt etc. can be helpful but be careful with oil-based lubricants (e.g. olive oil) as they can damage condoms. It may take some months to make a significant difference though and you will have to keep using the lubricant to benefit.

Self Image

Losing all or part of your breast through cancer surgery can have a huge impact on the way you see your body and experience your femininity. In addition mastectomy can damage nerves affecting nipple sensitivity though feeling usually remains after breast-conserving surgery. Radiotherapy can leave the skin red and raw and may permanently change the size, texture and shape of the breast.
Regaining a positive self-image after breast cancer treatment requires work and courage. Your doctor will have good advice but this may also be a good time to seek counselling to help rebuild self-esteem.
After breast cancer treatments you will be faced with another raft of big decisions including whether to have reconstructive surgery or to wear prosthesis. Some women may choose neither option. Take your time and decide what is right for you.

Single Women

Many women have to face breast cancer without the support of an intimate partner. For those not in a relationship this can raise a series of special challenges for example when you chose to have a new relationship when and what should you tell a prospective partner?
It is important to establish a caring relationship before you reveal too much, but do not wait too long! It is best to be frank and let your partner know what they can expect before becoming sexually intimate – including the effects of surgery as well the prospect of more treatment and the effects on libido etc. It might help to practice on friends first, or in front of a mirror and to talk to support groups and compare notes with others.
Remember that your experiences of breast cancer are part of who you are and if your new partner doesn't want to accept that then it's probably time to leave.
Those in lesbian relationships may discover their partners have special understanding of the implications of breast cancer. They may also experience specific fears about their own vulnerability.