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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Prostate Cancer & Sexuality

Prostate Cancer

Being told you have cancer can be a terrible shock; there is much new information to absorb and many decisions to be made about treatment.
As well as the emotional turmoil you may have to cope with physical changes resulting from treatments (surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and hormone therapy etc). These include erectile dysfunction, incontinence, exhaustion, weight gain or loss, nausea and pain. Some of these changes will be short-lived whilst others may be permanent.
So it's little wonder a diagnosis of prostate 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's important not to let prostate cancer define who you are. And it will help to 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 prostate cancer on your life. Addressing these issues early will help you (and your partner if you have one) adjust more quickly. It's very likely cancer, and its treatment, will impact on your sex life but it doesn't mean it's over, although it's true that sex may well be different following treatment.
You might feel like you are on a roller coaster and you will need to allow for fluctuating emotions and desires in response to these changes. If you have a partner it may help to remind each other about all the qualities that bind you such as humor, intelligence etc. Also remember you are not alone; should you want help there are organizations, like the Cancer Council and Impotence Australia, which can provide information and support to you (and your partner) at any stage of your treatment and recovery.

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 prostate 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

Following treatment for prostate cancer many men find difficulty in getting erections and may need help. Even though doctors aim to save as many of the nerves and blood vessels needed for good erections most men will still experience some difficulties post surgery including difficulty in achieving and maintaining an erection and varying degree of incontinence. A decrease in sexual desire is hardly surprising given the physical and psychological toll cancer and its treatments can take. The good news is that studies show the sooner you focus on your sex life the greater the chance of recovery. Remember a prostate isn't essential for good sex but treatment for prostate cancer can affect your sex life and you might need to make a few adaptations.

Whilst being sensual you may discover various changes to your sex life:

1: Erectile Dysfunction (ED)

Many factors like age, physical health, obesity, diabetes and smoking may affect your ability to get and maintain firm erections. ED is also an expected, but not necessarily permanent, consequence of prostate cancer treatment (30-80% patients treated by radical prostetectomy experience ED)*. Things that may give you a higher likelihood of ED post treatment are, if the cancer has spread outside the prostate and if vital nerves and blood vessels cannot be spared during surgery.
Age is a major factor when it comes to restoring erectile function; if you are under 60, healthy and were achieving good erections (without impotence medications) prior to cancer treatment, you are much more likely to recover and resume sexual activity, without needing impotence treatments, than if you fall into the older age group and had been having fewer firm erections.
The good news is that some erections can be improved and you have the best chance of doing this if you start ED treatment early, but remember ED increases with age regardless of cancer.
Recovery of erections depends on the level of pre-treatment erectile function – it will never be better than before! Talk to your doctor, the earlier the better, and ask about impotence treatments that may help you. These treatments may include oral medications (Viagra, Levitra and Cialis), injection therapy, vacuum pumps and penile implants.

2: Incontinence

There have been huge advances in surgical procedures for prostate cancer that aim to spare nerves and blood vessels. Up to 95% of men experience incontinence after radical prostatectomy but most will recover. (Less than 3% of men will remain permanently incontinent following radical prostatectomy.) It's important to talk to you doctor about management of incontinence before your surgery.

3: Loss of Libido.

Your libido should not be adversely affected by treatment (with the exception of hormone therapy) but the stress and anxiety associated with having cancer may well temporarily dampen sexual desire.

When resuming intimate relations it might be helpful to temporarily ban 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 changes before moving on to intercourse.

4. Changes to ejaculation:

Treatment for all forms of prostate cancer affects the amount of semen (ejaculate) produced. For some it will be reduced but if you have had a radical prostatectomy you will be able to achieve orgasm but you will have "dry" ejaculation because there is no seminal fluid.

If you experience any other changes then inform your doctor.

Sex Tips

- Take time to enjoy the arousal process rather than focusing on getting an erection.
- Remember you can give pleasure and achieve orgasm with a half erect penis.
- Explore other ways of giving and receiving pleasure through sexual play, whole body touching, oral sex, masturbation etc.

Single Men

Many men have to face cancer without the support of an intimate partner and this can raise some challenges for example when and how to tell a partner about your cancer and any sexual concerns you may have.

It is important to establish a caring relationship before you reveal too much, but do not wait too long! It's best to be frank and let your partner know what to expect before becoming sexually intimate – including the effects of surgery as well as the prospects of ongoing cancer care.

Gay men may discover their partners have a special understanding of the implications of prostate cancer – not only may they connect with what you are experiencing as a man but they may also experience specific fears about their own vulnerability.

If you need help in working out how to disclose the remember help is as close as a phone call to Impotence Australia, the Cancer Council and other counsellors.