



Questions about **SEX**?



**McMaster
Children's Hospital**

© Hamilton Health Sciences 2007
pd# 5892

Information for
teen girls
and young women
with cancer

Questions about sex?

Having cancer affects all aspects of your life.

You need to learn a lot about your cancer and its treatment, but what about your questions about sex?

Some teens and young adults don't feel comfortable bringing up this topic. The health care team has written this booklet to answer some common questions.

Our answers are based on the best evidence we have from medical research and our experience with patients, **and are meant as a guideline only**. We hope that this book gives you helpful information.

We also want this book to “open the door” for conversation. Please consider talking with a member of your health care team if you have questions or need more information. We are comfortable talking with patients about sex. You can talk privately with any one of us and ask all your questions. **We will keep your concerns and personal information confidential.**



Table of contents

	Page
General information	
What are we talking about?	1
Changes in your body and mind	1
It can help to talk about it	2
Find ways to stay close	2
When can I have sex again?	3
Specific questions	
What level should my platelets be?	4
What level should my neuts be?	4
How long should I wait after chemo or radiation?	5
Do I need to protect my partner or myself?	5
What methods of birth control are safe?	6
Will treatment change my periods?	7
What about pregnancy?	7
For information and help	
Where can I get more information?	8
When should I ask for help?	8

General information

What are we talking about?

First, let's be clear - we're talking about **SEX**.

What does that mean?

- It means much more than “having sex”. Having sex means sexual activity, such as vaginal, oral or anal sex and masturbation.
- It means everything relating to sex. This is called sexuality.

Sexuality is a normal, healthy part of your life.

Your sexuality includes:

- how you see yourself as a woman
- wanting to be close to someone
- feeling horny, wanting to have sex
- your body's response to sexual feelings
- how you satisfy yourself

Having cancer may affect each of these things.

Changes in your body and mind

It is normal to have some long and some short-term relationships. If you are in a strong relationship, your partner means a lot to you and he or she gives you support and love. When you are faced with cancer, you may feel differently about a lot of things, including your relationships with others. This is normal.

When it comes to the person you have a sexual relationship with, you may feel different because you are thinking about your health. Or maybe you just do not feel like yourself. This is normal.

You may not feel like being close in a sexual way with another person when you think you look different. Cancer treatment can change your body in ways you think make you less attractive. Changes may include losing your hair, losing or gaining weight, or having scars from surgery. It is normal not to feel like having sex when you are concerned about how you look.

You may also feel very tired. Having less energy can make you less interested in having sex. Fatigue can last a long time, even after treatment is stopped.

These changes in your body and mind affect how you respond to sexual thoughts and situations. You may not get as wet (aroused) or come (cum, have an orgasm) as usual. If your vagina feels dry, having sex can be uncomfortable. A water-soluble lubricant or lubricated condom can help.

It is important to remember most changes are **temporary**.

It can help to talk about it

Even though it can be hard to open up, you may feel relieved if you tell your partner about your feelings, worries or fears. Talking helps you understand each other's feelings and support each other. Together, you may find ways to work around problems and make changes in your relationship.

If you feel stressed out or overwhelmed, you may find it helpful to talk with a sympathetic person. This could be a close friend, family member or another person who has had cancer.

Please consider talking to a member of your health care team. Although it may be hard to bring up this topic, we are used to discussing sexuality with patients.

Find ways to stay close

You may feel too tired, weak or unwell to have sex. At the same time, you may be worried that you aren't satisfying your partner's sexual needs. Don't worry. Relationships can survive without having sex.

Even though you aren't having sex, both of you still need to feel loved and be touched. Find ways to be close by spending time alone, touching, holding or kissing each other.

When can I have sex again?

With time, your usual sexual feelings will return. You may have sex when you feel ready. It's OK to wait until you have completely recovered.

When you are ready, take it slow. Let your partner know how you feel. Tell him or her what you would like and what feels good. Depending on your health, you may need to find new ways of pleasing each other. For example, you may need to change positions to make having sex more comfortable.

Sometimes there are medical risks. For example, it is not safe to have sex when your blood counts are too low. You also need to know that there can still be some risks, even when your blood counts are at an acceptable level. The thin lining of the vagina and anus can easily be torn, which could cause bleeding or infection. This is the reason we don't put thermometers or medications into the rectum. To protect your health, carefully consider the decisions you make about having sex.

The next section answers questions about risks. Please use the information as a guide, not as personal medical advice. We encourage you to talk with your oncologist to find out if having sex is risky for your health or your partner's health.

Specific questions

What level should my platelets be?

Your platelet count should be at least “50” before having sex. This includes all sexual activity such as masturbating, vaginal, oral or anal sex.

The platelet count is reported in different ways

In conversation we may say: “50”	=	On test results you will see: $50 \times 10^9/L$	=	You may read: 50,000 or $50 \times 10^3/\text{microliter}$
--	---	--	---	--

Why? Because any sexual activity can cause bleeding. It doesn't have to be rough sex. There can be such a tiny amount of blood that you can't even see it. This can be dangerous if your platelets are low.

Platelets are cells in your blood that stick together to help make a clot and stop bleeding. If you do not have enough platelets, your body cannot stop the bleeding.

What level should my neuts be?

Your Absolute Neutrophil Count (also called ANC, neutrophils, neuts, granulocytes or grans) should be at least “1” before having sex. This includes all sexual activity such as masturbating, vaginal, oral or anal sex.

ANC (neuts or grans) are reported in different ways

In conversation we may say: “1”	=	On test results you will see: $1 \times 10^9/L$	=	You may read: 1,000 or $1 \times 10^3/\text{microliter}$
---	---	---	---	--

Why? Because any sexual activity can spread germs and may cause infections. Neuts are white blood cells that fight germs and can prevent infection.

During foreplay (making out, touching) and all sexual activity, germs that naturally live on the skin can enter your body. This could cause an infection. Two common infections related to sex are yeast infections and bladder (urinary tract) infections. These would be minor problems for someone in good health, but can be more serious if your neutrophils are low.

It is also possible to get a sexually transmitted infection (STI) if you have unprotected sex with an infected person. With low neutrophils, your immune system is too weak to fight the infection, and a STI could become very serious. Even if your neutrophils are normal, protect yourself by using a condom every time you have sex (vaginal, oral or anal sex). There are male and female condoms that can protect you.

How long should I wait after chemo or radiation?

We recommend that you wait at least 72 hours after chemotherapy to have sex. This is the average time it takes for chemo to leave your system. Having sex sooner could expose your partner to the effects of chemotherapy.

Radiation therapy does not linger in your body, so there is no risk to your partner. You do not have to wait.

If you are sexually active, please read the following questions about protecting yourself and your partner.

Do I need to protect my partner or myself?

Yes. If you are sexually active you need to take some precautions.

During chemotherapy, a small amount of medication could pass into the fluid inside your vagina. Your oncologist can tell you if your chemotherapy medication will do this. It is best to wait at least 72 hours before having sex to protect your partner from exposure to chemotherapy.

You can get pregnant during chemotherapy, even if your periods have stopped. Each month, your ovaries may continue to release an egg. You can get pregnant if your partner's sperm fertilizes an egg. As chemotherapy may damage your eggs and cause serious birth defects, you must prevent pregnancy with birth control.

Decide on a method of birth control and have it ready, before having sex. Talk with your oncologist if you need help choosing a method of birth control.

If you have had many blood transfusions, you may worry about getting an infection and passing it to your partner. This is extremely unlikely to happen as all blood donors and donated blood are carefully tested.

One thing you don't have to worry about is giving your partner cancer. Cancer cannot be passed from one person to another.

What methods of birth control are safe?

Protect yourself by using a latex condom with spermicide every time you have vaginal sex. Condoms also protect you from sexually transmitted infections.

It is OK to take birth control pills during radiation treatment. However, it is possible that chemotherapy could make birth control pills less effective. Please talk with your oncologist about this.

Your platelets should be at least "50" and your neuts should be at least "1" to use birth control methods that are inserted into the vagina, such as:

- diaphragm
- female condom
- contraceptive sponge

If your platelets or neuts are too low, it is not safe to use vaginal methods of birth control.

An intrauterine device (IUD) is put inside your uterus. This method of birth control is not safe for you.

Why? Because putting something in your vagina or uterus can rub, scratch or tear the delicate lining inside. This could cause bleeding or infection.

If you have any questions about birth control, talk with your oncologist.

Will treatment change my periods?

Your treatment may change your periods (menstrual cycle). Your periods may stop or become irregular. The amount of bleeding you have during a period may also change; it could be more or less.

It is important to know that even though your periods may stop or come less often, it is still possible to get pregnant.

When you have your period, you can use tampons if your platelets are at least “50” and your neuts are at least “1”. Follow the directions in the package of tampons to know what type to use and how often to change them.

If your platelets or neuts are too low, you should not use tampons. Use sanitary pads and change your pads often. Putting a tampon in your vagina can rub, scratch or tear the delicate lining inside. This could cause bleeding or infection. Also, if a tampon is left inside for too long, it could cause infection.

Your platelets may be very low at times while you are getting chemotherapy. This could cause heavy bleeding during your periods. To prevent this loss of blood, your oncologist may recommend controlling or stopping your periods during your treatment. This is done by taking birth control pills or a contraceptive medication called Depo-Provera®.

What about pregnancy?

While you are having cancer treatment is not a good time to get pregnant.

It is important to talk with your oncologist before making plans for a pregnancy or if you have an unplanned pregnancy.

If you get pregnant during treatment, you may have to stop or change your therapy. This could affect the success of your cancer treatment and your health.

For information and help

Where can I get more information?

We hope that you will feel comfortable asking us any questions that you have. Together we can discuss what is best for you and your cancer treatment goals. If we don't know the answers, we'll do our best to find someone who does.

There's also lots of health information on the web. Just remember that it may not be true or right for you. Please talk with a member of the health care team about the information you find on the internet.

When should I ask for help?

Please contact a member of the health care team if sexual activity is painful or you have any concerns.

Your notes and questions
