



## Sexual function and fertility during cancer therapy

Chemotherapy treatment may, but does not always, affect a person's sexual organs and functioning. Possible side-effects will depend on the medications prescribed to you as well as your age and general health.

When men receive chemotherapy it may lower the number of sperm cells produced, reduce sperm cell motility, or it may cause other sperm cell abnormalities. These changes can result in short or long-term infertility affecting the ability to father a child. The treatment does not, however, affect your ability to have sexual intercourse.

Because permanent sterility (infertility) may occur, it is important to discuss this possibility and the option of 'banking' sperm for future use with your doctor before starting chemotherapy treatment.

Chemotherapy may have harmful effects on the chromosomes of sperm cells, so men and their partners must use effective means of birth control whilst undergoing the chemotherapy treatment. Ask your doctor when it is safe to stop using birth control.

When women receive chemotherapy it can damage the ovaries and reduce hormone production, resulting in short-or long-term infertility (inability to fall pregnant). It is important to discuss this possibility with your doctor before starting chemotherapy.

## / Tips to help prevent infection



Avoid oil-based lubricants such as petroleum jelly



Always use a condom for sexual intercourse



Wear cotton underwear and pantyhose with a breathable cotton lining



Don't wear tight slacks or shorts



Your doctor may prescribe a vaginal cream or suppository to reduce the chances of infection



Report vaginal infections so that they are treated right away

Although it may be possible to have chemotherapy during pregnancy, it is not advisable because sometimes such treatments may cause birth defects. Doctors generally advise women within childbearing age to use birth control throughout their treatment. If you are considering pregnancy after completing chemotherapy, discuss it with your doctor.

The effects of chemotherapy on your hormones may include the following side-effects:



Menstrual periods may become irregular or stop completely



Menopause-like symptoms, e.g. hot flushes, itching, burning, or dryness of the vagina and surrounding area. This can make intercourse uncomfortable, and the symptoms can often be relieved by using water-based vaginal lubricant



Vaginal infections are more likely to occur

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## Emotional effects

It is important to remember that good sexual functioning is a combination of physical and emotional wellbeing.

Chemotherapy can cause hair loss and water retention. This can impact on how attractive you may feel, and dampen your libido.

Chemotherapy usually brings major changes to a person's life. It can affect your overall health, threaten feelings of well-being, disrupt your daily routines, and put a strain on your relationships. It is normal and understandable if you or your family and friends feel sad, anxious, angry, or depressed. There are ways to cope with these emotional side-effects, just as there are ways to cope with the physical side-effects of chemotherapy.

### Tips for coping with emotional effects:

It is easier to face the reality of a situation if you learn as much as possible about it – knowledge can help lessen the fear of the unknown.

There is a great deal to learn about each type of cancer and the treatment thereof as there are many sources of information that you can utilise. Ask your doctor and nurse about where you can obtain information and make your medical appointments as useful as possible by:



Making a list of any questions to ask the doctor / nurse



Taking a family member or friend with you to serve as an extra pair of ears as well as to support you



Taking notes and / or record important discussions and conversations



Asking for an explanation if an unfamiliar word is used or if there is something mentioned that you don't understand

Counselling professionals	Counsellors can help you to express, understand, and cope with emotions brought about by chemotherapy. There are several different professionals that can help you depending on your preferences and needs. These include a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, sex therapist, or spiritual support through a chaplain, pastor, rabbi, or other religious leaders.
Friends and family	Friends and family members can sometimes provide you with comfort and reassurance in ways that no one else can. Many people may initially worry about upsetting you if they approach the subject. You can help relieve these fears by talking openly with them about your illness, the treatment you are undergoing, your feelings and how they can assist you.
Support groups	Support groups are made up of people who are going through the same or similar experiences as what you are facing. Sometimes it is easier to share your thoughts and feelings in this setting. Support groups also can serve as an important source of practical information about living with cancer and its treatment. Ask your doctor or nurse for information on the groups available in your area. If you feel overwhelmed by sadness or if you have thoughts of suicide, talk to your doctor or nurse about it or visit your nearest accident and emergency unit. Other symptoms that you should speak about include feelings of panic, intense anxiety and / or constant crying.

### 3 Other side-effects



Chemotherapies might cause other side-effects that have not been covered in this booklet.

Remember to always raise your questions and concerns about cancer, its treatment, or possible side-effects when you speak to your doctor and nurse.



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