

Intimacy During Treatment

For patients at Alvord Brain Tumor Center

How will treatment affect my sex life?

Treatment for your brain tumor may include chemotherapy, surgery, radiation, or all 3 options. These treatments can cause emotional and physical changes that can affect sexuality.

Cancer treatments can lessen sexual desire and erections in men. Women may have vaginal dryness and even early menopause. Both men and women may lose interest in sex during treatment. Some may have concerns about their body image.

Is it safe to have sex during treatment?

Ask your doctor or nurse this question. Traces of certain chemotherapy drugs may be present in vaginal fluid and semen after treatment. This means you may need to take special precautions before sex.



Is it OK to get pregnant during treatment?

Be sure to ask your provider if you have any questions about being intimate during your treatment.

- Women **must** avoid becoming pregnant or breastfeeding during and after chemotherapy.
- Men **must** avoid impregnating their partner while taking chemotherapy.
- If you plan to have sex, we advise that you use 2 forms of effective birth control during treatment. See the handout “Birth Control Options.”

Is it safe for me to kiss someone?

Kissing is a wonderful way to stay close to those you love. Most of the time, it is OK to kiss someone.

But, to lower your risk of infection, avoid kissing anyone who has mouth sores, cold sores, or cold or flu symptoms.

Also, because chemotherapy can be found in the saliva:

- Avoid open-mouth kissing where saliva is exchanged for a short period during and after chemotherapy.
- Ask your doctor or nurse how long you need to avoid open-mouth kissing. This will depend on what type of chemotherapy you receive.

When is sexual activity restricted?

- Sexual intercourse is restricted when your platelet count is less than 50,000.
- Sexual activity is also restricted if:
 - Your white blood counts are low (neutrophil count less than 500)
 - You have vaginal or rectal bleeding
 - Your partner has a sexually transmitted infection

Why don't I have much sexual desire?

Lack of desire is also called *low libido*. For many people, it is a normal response to the stress of treatment and not feeling well.

There can be physical reasons that desire is lacking. Some medicines can interfere with sexual desire. Chemotherapy and radiation often affect hormones. Sometimes, this can be treated with hormone supplementation or other medicines.

Talk with your doctor or nurse if lack of desire is a problem. They can assess your situation. They may advise more tests, or suggest treatments or counseling.

Is there anything I can do about my fatigue?

Fatigue (feeling very tired) can last for a long time after treatment. Try to plan sex for the part of the day when you feel the most energetic.

Also, know that sexual pleasure doesn't always need to involve penetration. Talk with your partner about other ways you can give each other pleasure, like touching, cuddling, or kissing.

I'm having difficulty with erections. What can I do about this?

This problem can occur after or during treatment for different reasons. Sometimes, it's harder to become and stay aroused because of stress and fatigue. Chemotherapy and radiation to the brain can affect hormones involved in arousal and erection.

Hormone supplementation or medicines to treat erectile dysfunction can be helpful. Your doctor will decide if medicines will be helpful for you.

Is oral sex OK?

Oral sex is acceptable with certain precautions:

- Avoid oral sex:
 - While chemotherapy may be in your body fluids. Talk with your doctor or nurse about how long to wait after treatment.
 - If your platelet or neutrophil counts are low.
 - If you or your partner have open sores in the mouth or on the genitals.
- To reduce the risk of infection:
 - Both parties should clean their genitals before and after oral sex.
 - Avoid contact with the rectal area.
- You can use dental dams and condoms if you are on chemotherapy. These work as a barrier between the mouth and genitals or anus.

Is anal sex OK?

- Wear condoms during anal sex.
- Avoid anal sex if:
 - Your platelet count or your partner's is less than 100,000
 - You or your partner is neutropenic
 - You or your partner has bleeding, diarrhea, hemorrhoids, anal fissures, or tears

What can I do to about pain during intercourse?

Women:

- Use a water-soluble lubricant during sexual activity to help with dryness.
- Take time to allow yourself to get into the mood. When you are aroused, the vagina expands to its fullest length and width.
- Learn to relax your vaginal muscles during intercourse. Kegel exercises help you learn to relax these muscles.

Men:

If you have pain with ejaculation or erection, please talk with your doctor. We will need to make sure that you do not have another problem, such as an infection.

What else should I do?

Report these signs to your doctor:

- **Women:** Vaginal dryness, discharge, pain, discomfort or bleeding after or during intercourse, hot flashes
- **Men:** Pain during ejaculation, genital pain, discharge

Take these steps to avoid infection:

- Both you and your partner should wash your hands before and after sexual activity
- Urinate after sex. This rinses out bacteria that may have gotten into your urinary tract during intercourse that can cause infections.
- Avoid sexual contact with people who have sexually transmitted infections.

Talk about your concerns:

- Talk with your partner and your doctor. Ask questions. Even if you feel shy about the subject, try to be open and ask your doctor or nurse about sexual activity.
- Tell your doctor or nurse if you are having pain during sexual activity. Medical treatments can often be helpful. Do not let discomfort get in the way of your healthcare or quality of life.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.

To talk with a nurse:

Weekdays from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., call 206.598.2282 and select option #2.

After hours and on weekends and holidays, call our Community Care Line at 206.598.3300.