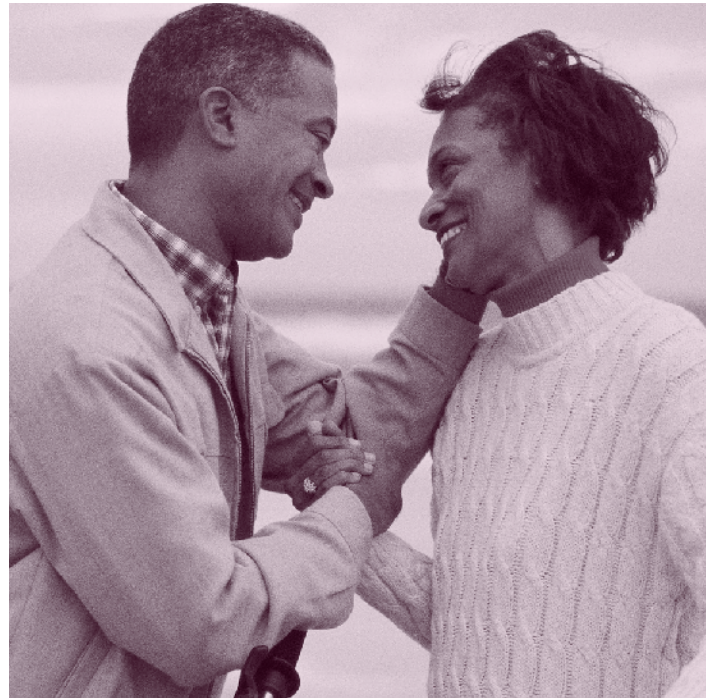


Intimacy, sexuality and breast cancer

In a perfect world, every relationship would provide the intimacy and sexuality a woman needs to feel happy and secure all the time. In the real world, breast cancer can sometimes make it difficult to be sexual or intimate with another person. At times, you may only want intimacy from your relationship. At other times, you may want both, or neither. That's okay and quite natural. Both can enrich your life and bring closeness to your relationship.

Breast cancer does not have to mean the end of sexuality and intimacy. Rather, it is a new beginning.



How to talk with your partner

If it was difficult for you and your partner to talk about your feelings and about sex before you got breast cancer, it will probably still be difficult to talk now. While there is no such thing as the perfect time to talk, some times are better than others. Choose a moment when you are relaxed and alone together. When you feel comfortable, give yourself and your partner permission to talk about your feelings, both good and bad. Above all else, be honest. You may want to try talking about:

- **Your biggest fears** — Women may be afraid their partner will leave or reject them because of their breast cancer. Men may be afraid of physically hurting their partner during sex. Talking about each other's fears allows you to reassure each other.
- **Birth control** — A baby that is conceived while you are undergoing radiation therapy, chemotherapy or while using tamoxifen could have birth defects. That is why it is important to talk to your partner about birth control. After treatment, do not assume that you are infertile unless your doctor tells you there is absolutely no chance of becoming pregnant.
- **Your “new” sex life** — Breast cancer may change what you like to do and how you like to be touched during sex. You may not even want to have sex for a while. Your partner may not realize this. That is why you need to talk about it. You will probably find your partner is willing to do anything that will make you happy.

Why don't you...

Take it easy

Bring some romance back into your life. Plan a relaxing candlelight dinner. Take a bubble bath. Take the time to nurture your sexuality.

Go slow

Who says you need to have intercourse every time you feel sexual? Kissing and touching can provide just as much pleasure.

Get comfortable

Sex may be painful if you do not have as much natural lubrication as you did before. Try using a water-based lubricant like Astroglide® or KY Jelly®.

Do something different

Change your sexual routine. Experiment. Try new things. Have some fun.

Get some advice

Consider seeking advice from a marriage counselor or joining a support group. You can go with your partner or by yourself.

Share this list of ideas with your partner. Getting the intimacy and sexuality you need should not be your responsibility alone.

Looking in the mirror

Breast cancer may or may not change the way you look. But it can change the way you feel about your self-image. While most women agree that their breasts are only part of what defines them as a woman, they are still deeply affected by the loss of a breast. A woman's breasts symbolize so many positive things — motherhood, sexuality and being a woman. But for some women, breasts also now represent cancer. Most women, and their partners, will need to take time to grieve the loss of a breast.

Joining a support group may help you cope with all the changes in your body and self-image. Some women find these changes difficult, others find strength in their new image of themselves. Remind yourself that healing takes time. At some point, every woman with breast cancer becomes more comfortable with her body. Accepting yourself as you are is all part of the process.

Resources

What's happening to the woman I love? by Susan G. Komen for the Cure®, 2008.
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org



Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Health Resources
- Getting the Support You Need
- Talking With Your Partner