

Sex and Cancer

Cancer can affect every aspect of your life, including sex. Expect your sex life to change during cancer treatment. You will need to practice “safe sex.” This may mean using methods that are new to you. You may also notice changes in your sex drive. Know that all of this is normal. We are here to help you understand and cope with these changes.



Resources

Cancer Help Line

(603) 650-7751 or 1 (800) 639-6918
Email: cancerhelp@dartmouth.edu

Women’s Health Resource Center at DHMC

(603) 650-2600
Online www.dhmc.org/dept/whrc

Health Education Center at DHMC

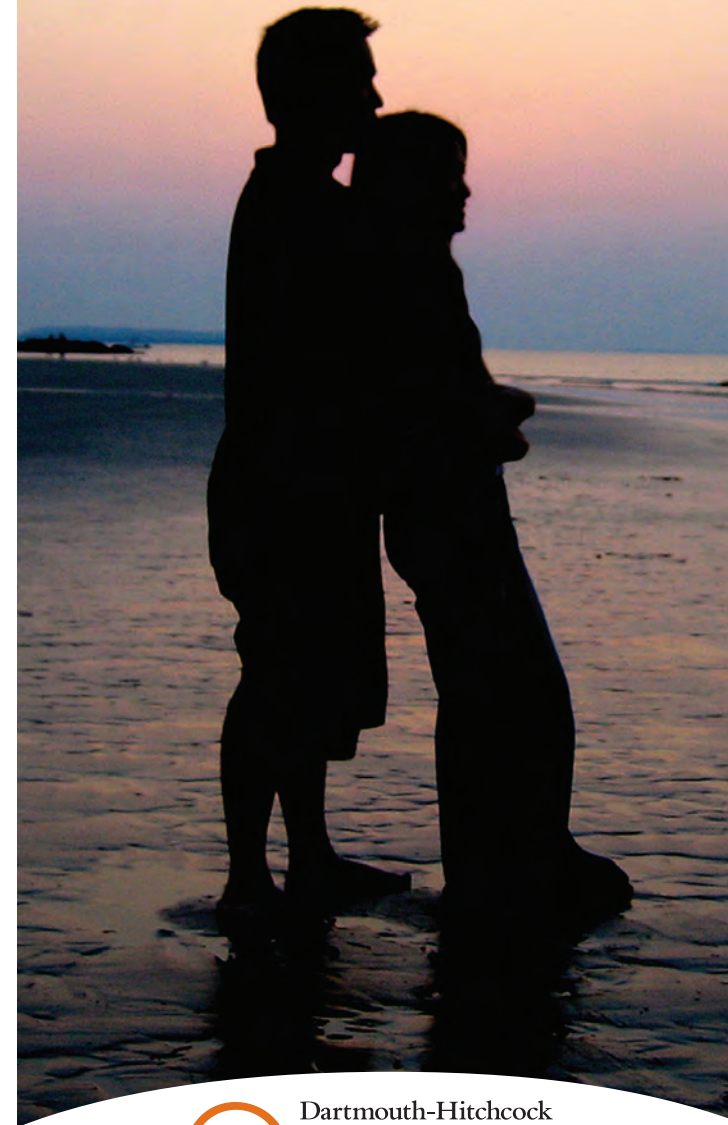
(603) 650-8710
Located on the East Mall, level 4
Open Monday – Friday, 8am-5pm.



Dartmouth-Hitchcock
**NORRIS COTTON
CANCER CENTER**

Norris Cotton Cancer Center
One Medical Center Drive
Lebanon, NH 03756
(603) 650-7751
Email: cancersupport@hitchcock.org
cancer.dartmouth.edu/support

Sex During Cancer Treatment: How to avoid complications and infections



Dartmouth-Hitchcock
**NORRIS COTTON
CANCER CENTER**

Protecting Yourself and Your Partner

If you are of childbearing age, you should use birth control during cancer treatment. Radiation and chemotherapy can damage eggs or sperm. This can lead to birth defects or miscarriage. Continue birth control for at least six months after your last treatment.

When you have sexual contact, use a barrier device. For vaginal or anal sex use condoms. For oral sex use a dental dam. These latex barriers will protect you from possible infection. Cancer treatments weaken your immune system. This means that it is easier to get sick or catch infections. Your blood counts help measure your risk of infection. If your blood counts are really low, you may be asked not to have sex at all.

For Women

Use birth control to prevent pregnancy during treatment. Continue to use birth control after your last treatment. Your doctor will tell you when to stop using protection. You have many choices for birth control during cancer care. Talk to your doctor to see if it is OK to use hormonal treatments such as “the pill.” There are other methods to choose from. Work with your doctor to find what works best for you.

Some women have vaginal dryness, burning, or swelling during cancer care. This may make sex painful or even cause bleeding. To solve this problem, try using a water-based lubricant in your vagina. This will protect you from feeling sore or tender after sex.

For Men

Use a condom each time you have sex. This can prevent pregnancy, which is important. If your partner can get pregnant, she should talk to her gynecologist about birth control. Sperm damaged by radiation

or chemotherapy can lead to birth defects. Take every precaution to avoid pregnancy during cancer treatment. Even if your partner can't get pregnant, use a condom every time. It protects you from infection. Cancer treatment weakens your ability to fight off infection. Getting sick can delay cancer treatment. Don't take the risk. Use a condom for all sexual contact.

Some men in cancer treatment have increased sensitivity to friction. This can cause discomfort or frustration. To avoid any problems with friction, use a water-based lubricant with your condom.

If You Want to Start a Family One Day

If you plan to have children after cancer treatment, tell your doctor. Some cancer treatments have side effects on the reproductive systems of men and women. Make sure your doctor knows it is important for you to be able to have children one day. It could change the types of treatments you receive.

Alternatives to Sex

Sexual patterns may change when you or a partner have cancer. Talk about your sexual desires. It is normal for someone “not to be in the mood.” Cancer patients may be tired or in pain. They may be uncomfortable or embarrassed with how surgery has changed their bodies. It's common to have a low sex drive at points in cancer care.

At other times, a person with cancer may seek intimacy. But that intimacy may be different than normal. A person with cancer can feel comforted by snuggling. Couples should talk about how they feel about hugging, kissing, or holding hands. One or both partners may find it helps with worry and fears. Be honest. Be open. Be flexible. That will help your sex life survive cancer care.

Quick Review

- Talk to your doctor about sex safety when you have low blood counts.
- Use birth control during and after treatment.
- Use a condom each time you have sex to prevent infection, protect your partner, and reduce friction.
- Use water-based lubricants to prevent vaginal bleeding. It also treats dryness and irritation.
- Your doctor may recommend that you abstain from sex if your platelets are less than 50,000 or your ANC is under 500.
- Ask your doctor or nurse about safe sex practices.
- See back panel for additional resources.

Questions for my doctor:

Special instructions for my situation:

What to do in an emergency:
