

Relationships and sexuality

For some people, having cancer and cancer treatment has no effect on their sexuality. However, the anxiety and/or depression felt by some people can affect their sexual desire. We are all sexual beings and intimacy adds to the quality of our lives. Cancer treatment and the psychological effects of cancer may affect you and your partner in different ways.

Sex after treatment for bowel cancer

Most people are able to have satisfying sex lives after bowel cancer, but you will need time to get over surgery or other treatments. You should not have penetrative sex for at least six weeks after major surgery. This allows that area time to heal and gives your stomach muscles time to recover. If you have had surgery involving the anus, you are advised to wait 10 to 12 weeks before having sex. But there is no reason why chemotherapy or radiation treatment should stop you having sex if you feel like it.

Many people do not feel like sex while they are having treatment. Side effects and general tiredness can get in the way. Surgery to the bowel or anus can affect the nerves to the sex organs.

Maintaining or keeping an erection may be difficult and your orgasm may be dry. Your ability to have an erection will depend on whether there is nerve damage. If you have any problems with sex after your treatment, you can discuss this with a health professional. There are a number of treatments available for erectile problems.

Anal sex can resume, or may start, when it is comfortable for patients and partners. For those who have had surgery to close the anus, this will not be possible.

Having sex when you have a stoma

If your surgery requires you to have a stoma formed for bowel cancer, there is a high chance of permanent damage to the blood and nerves that supply the genital area. This may cause problems with getting and maintaining erections.

A stoma can make some sexual positions uncomfortable, and needing to change a stoma bag before sex may spoil the moment. People may also worry that a stoma bag will fall off and/or they may have a bowel motion during sex.

Having a stoma may make you feel self-conscious about the change in your body. This can result in sexual difficulties with your partner, or make you feel anxious about new relationships. Stomal therapists can give advice and help you with these kinds of issue.

Occasionally problems may arise because partners are struggling with change. It can be helpful to discuss it if you feel there is awkwardness between you. Your partner cannot damage the stoma, so go with the position you are comfortable with.

Practical tips if you have a stoma

People with stomas sometimes worry about whether their bags will get in the way. If a bag is emptied before sex, it can be folded up and secured with some tape to your body to prevent it moving around.

If a bag is not covered with fabric, some people choose to use a cotton cover during sex. This prevents the bag rubbing on you and your partner's skin. If you usually wear a transparent bag, the cover hides the contents. Some people choose to wear silky or cotton vest-like tops that cover the bags and the top halves of their bodies.

If your anus has been removed, the position of being on top of your partner may be uncomfortable for vaginal sex. One option is to enter the vagina from behind.

A finger, a penis or a sex toy should not be pushed into a stoma because this could damage the stoma.

If you have faecal oozing, use plugs designed for rectal use. Plan to have a spare stoma bag and toilet tissues or wet wipes on hand in case an accident does occur.

If you are worried about your bag making noises, try playing music during sex.

Ostomy Societies

These groups provide support and practical advice to people with ostomies (stomas). Some societies are not listed in the phone book, but your local Cancer Society can put you in contact with a group in your area.

For more information about sexuality, you can read the Cancer Society's booklet *Sex and Cancer*. You can download a copy from the Cancer Society's website (www.cancernz.org.nz).