

# Sexual Health and Radiation Therapy

A guide for women

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**This booklet will give you information about:**

- Who you can talk to about your sexual health
- Side effects of radiation therapy
- Commonly asked questions
- Sexual health services and resources



# Talking about sexual health

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This booklet is for women who are having radiation therapy. It will talk about how your treatment may affect your sexual health.

Even if you are not having sex now, you may find this information useful in the future when you may want to return to sexual activity.

- During and after your treatment, you may have physical and emotional changes that affect your ability to enjoy life. These feelings can affect your sexual health.
- Feelings and attitude about sex and sexual health are very personal and may mean different things to different women.
- If you have questions about sex and sexual health, talk to your health care team. They can answer your questions or refer you to another team member who can.
- Sexual health is part of your overall health and it is important to us that your questions and concerns are answered.
- We hope that this information will help you feel comfortable asking questions and talking about your sexual health with your health care team.

# General side effects of radiation therapy

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## **Fatigue (tiredness):**

- You may feel tired during and after your treatment.
- This can last for many weeks after you finish your treatment.

## **Skin reactions (changes):**

- Your skin may get red, itchy and sensitive during treatment, especially where there are skin folds.
- This may make sexual activity difficult and uncomfortable.
- These skin changes are short-term and will start to get better after you finish your treatment.

## **Body image (how a person sees themselves):**

- Having cancer and treatment side effects may make you feel different about the way you look.
- Being intimate with (close to) another person may be difficult for you.

# Side effects of radiation therapy

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## **Brain treatment:**

### **Alopecia (hair loss)**

- You may lose your hair as part of your treatment.
- Without your hair you may feel different about the way you look.

## **Head and neck treatment:**

### **Xerostomia (dry mouth) / mucositis (sore mouth)**

- Your mouth and lips may get sore.
- Your saliva may dry up or feel thicker.
- These changes may mean that some sexual activity, like kissing or oral sex, may be difficult.

**If you have any questions about your side effects or want more information on how to manage them, talk to your health care team.**



# Side effects of radiation therapy

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## **Pelvic Treatment:**

### **Vaginal changes**

- You may have changes such as dryness, narrowing and/or shortening of your vagina after treatment. This happens as the tissues start to heal.
- You may use a dilator to stretch the tissues so that an internal examination and sexual activity can be comfortable for you.

### **Urinary (bladder)/bowel changes**

- If these areas are part of your treatment, it may lead to incontinence (some loss of control of your bladder and/or bowels)
- These changes are not permanent and should only last a few weeks.
- You may feel less comfortable in being intimate (close to somebody) and taking part in sexual activity.

### **Hormone changes**

- If your ovaries are part of your treatment, you may go through menopause if you have not already.
- Menopause can cause changes that affect your sexual health.
- Talk to your health care team if you have questions about menopause.

# Commonly asked questions

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## **Can I have sex while I am on radiation treatment?**

- If you have vaginal bleeding, talk to your health care team first. Intercourse may not be advisable until the bleeding stops.
- Otherwise, it is safe to have sex or masturbate during radiation therapy, as long as it does not cause discomfort.
- You may use a lubricant to make intercourse more comfortable.
- You or your partner should use birth control if there is a chance of pregnancy.

## **Can having sex make the cancer worse?**

- No. Having sex does not make cancer come back or spread.

## **Can my partner get cancer during sexual activity?**

- No. Sexual activities will not give your partner cancer.

## **Is it safe for my partner to have sex with me while I am on radiation therapy?**

- Yes. You are not radioactive during or after your treatment is finished.
- Talk to your health care team if you feel you may need to take special precautions.

# Services

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## **Odette Nursing Team**

416-480-5000

## **SHARE (Sexual Health and Recovery Clinic)**

M wing, 6th floor

(Louise Temerty Breast Cancer Centre)

416-480-5000 ext. 81022

## **Patient and Family Support Program**

Odette Cancer Centre, Room TG-230

416-480-6100 ext. 4623

# Support groups

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## **Look Good Feel Better Workshops**

[www.lgfb.ca](http://www.lgfb.ca) • 1-800-914-5665

# Booklets

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Please visit the PEARL (T-Wing, 1st floor, by main reception) or call 416-480-4534 to pick up a copy.

- **How to use a Vaginal Dilator after Radiation Treatment** (Sunnybrook, 2015)
- **Intimacy & Sex Guide** (Cancer Care Ontario, 2018)
- **Intimacy & Sexuality for Patients with an Ostomy** (Sunnybrook, 2017)
- **Managing Menopause** (without hormones) (Sunnybrook, 2011)
- **Sex, Intimacy & Cancer** (Canadian Cancer Society, 2018)
- **Sexual Health Information for Women with Cancer** (Sunnybrook, 2017)
- **Vaginal Health: About Vaginal Dryness** (Sunnybrook, 2017)



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