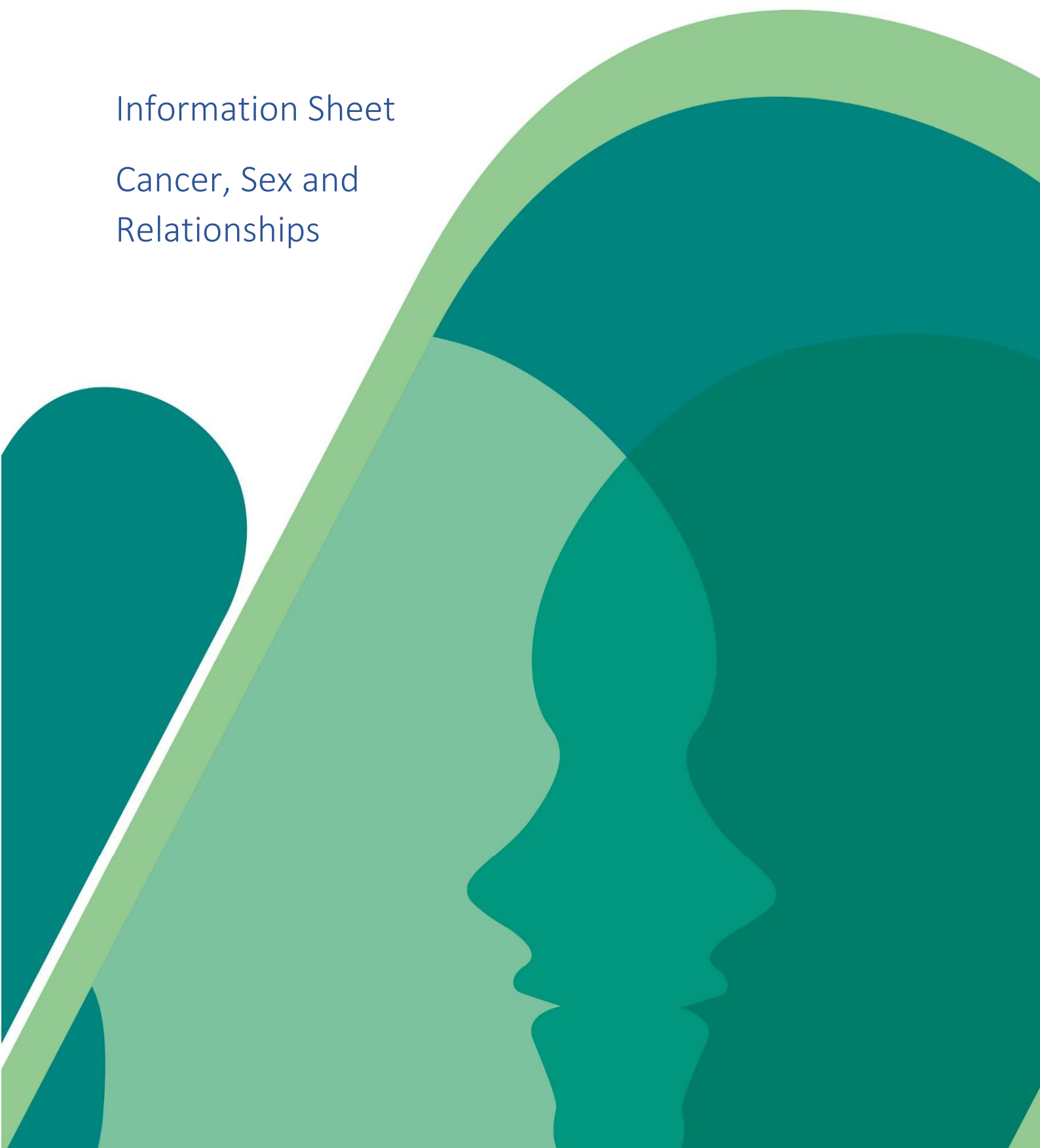




## Information Sheet

Cancer, Sex and  
Relationships



## Cancer, Sex and Relationships

For many people sex and sexuality is an important factor in their quality of life. Yet for many affected by Cancer, sexual health is a challenge both during treatment and then as a part of survivorship.

Not everyone with cancer will have changes in sexual desire or how they feel about themselves sexually. But you might find cancer changes your body image affecting the way you feel about yourself and sex.

Some people lose interest in sex and feel very tired. But some people say that they want to have sex more than usual. If you are in a relationship, a crisis can sometimes bring couples very close together.

As people are so different and have different sexual needs, it is impossible to say exactly how cancer will affect your sexuality and sex life. Some types of cancer and their treatment affect your ability or desire to have sex more than others. If you are in a loving relationship your concerns may be different from someone who is single.

If your feelings about your body and having sex change during your cancer treatment, it doesn't mean that it will last forever. If you are able to talk to your partner, doctor or nurses about your worries it can ease them. They may be able to suggest ways to help improve any problems you're having.

## Cancer, treatment, and sex

Having cancer or its treatment can cause a number of outcomes, both long and short term:

- sickness or feeling sick
- tiredness (fatigue)
- irritability
- sadness or depression
- anxiety or tension
- pain
- bowel problems such as diarrhoea
- bladder problems

- mouth problems
- breathing problems
- changes in appearance and scarring
- changes in your sex hormones

You might not feel like having sex if you have any of these side effects or feelings. Some people say they feel less attractive because of them. You might not have the energy to take as much interest in your clothes, hair, make up or grooming as you did before.

If you are the partner of someone in this situation, you might be very worried about your partner seeming so low. This is understandable. But many people feel better once their treatment is over, or their symptoms are better controlled.

## Some Challenges Facing Men

Many of the challenges faced by those affected by cancer are common, regardless of gender. But some are more specific.

For example, surgical interventions for men can cause particular challenges related to sex. Prostate, bladder and anal cancer can all lead to interventions that hamper sexual function if nerves or blood supply are affected. Similarly there are instances where radiation therapy can cause problems such as erectile dysfunction during and post-treatment.

Chemotherapy can cause sexual dysfunction problems for men, whilst some prostate cancer treatment can lower testosterone, impacting on penis size, libido and function.

## Some Challenges Facing Women

When women face surgery on reproductive organs there can be significant impacts on sex subsequently. For example, radical hysterectomies can involve the removal of part of the vagina. Whilst other cancer treatments, such as for vulvar tumours, can lead to interventions where nerves related to sexual arousal are damaged. As with men, women can face problems due to radiation therapy such as changes to pelvic organs.

Woman can also face sexual function challenges because of more systemic interventions than surgery or radiotherapy. Some people can, for example, suffer vaginal dryness or pain during sex because of chemotherapy or some anti-breast cancer therapies. Systemic cancer treatment can also directly or indirectly cause sexual dysfunction among women. Chemotherapy and some hormonal therapies used to treat breast cancer can induce postmenopausal-like symptoms including vaginal dryness, itching, and pain during sex.

## Facing Changes

Some of these changes can be temporary. Hair will grow back after chemotherapy. You might put on weight when taking steroids, but lose it again when your treatment is finished. It might only be a matter of time before you get back to what is normal for you.

Some people believe their past sex life has helped cause their cancer. This worry or guilt can make future sexual activity difficult. Some people with worries like these find it helpful to talk to someone about their fears.

Others might have a feeling of being unclean after treatment. It is important to acknowledge how powerful these feelings can be. It might be helpful to talk your fears through with a sympathetic person who can reassure you.

You will need to come to terms with the changes to your body if your treatment effects are more permanent, such as having a breast removed or having a permanent colostomy. Some people find this more difficult than others, and it might take some time. It might help to talk to other people who have been through the same thing. Psychotherapy and counselling might help to explore your feelings in more depth.

## Chemotherapy

One issue that many affected by cancer must consider is that Chemotherapy can be excreted in saliva and secretions for 48-72 hours after a treatment. You should use a condom for oral sex or intercourse (vaginal or anal) during this period to prevent your partner from being exposed to chemotherapy. (This includes IV and oral chemotherapy).

## Alternatives to 'Standard Sex'

Remember that sexual activity does not have to involve intercourse or oral sex. Try and use kissing, touching, caressing to satisfy yourself and others. Massaging, talking, holding hands can all help you feel intimate and relaxed. Even if you do not feel like having sex, a partner might still be able to arouse you and help you enjoy sexual activity.

It is important to agree on what is acceptable to each of you though. Talk to each other about your worries and fears. Do not be afraid to tell each other what you like, and don't like. Talking about sex can be difficult, but talking about feelings and what you each want can be very reassuring.

Because some surgeries and interventions can result in certain activities being painful, try different sexual positions if you can. Being able to try different things can help alleviate negativity or pressure on you. For example, if lying on your back during sex is painful, having both partners lying on their sides might be more comfortable.

## Wider Worries

Cancer can lead to a range of concerns and problems, from worries about jobs and incomes, to problems with shopping. If you have to stop work, you still need a regular income to pay your bills and any extra costs relating to your illness. These sort of practical challenges and worries can have a very real impact on your relationships. Conflicts can arise, and intimacy can be impacted.

There are other times when symptoms and side effects can make it very difficult to keep up your normal daily routine. At times you might have to organise other people to look after children. You might be concerned about how your cancer is affecting your children. Or you might have to ask close friends and family to help out with your shopping and cooking. Again, these important concerns can have emotional and psychological affects which impact on you, relationships and intimacy with others.

## Self Esteem and Confidence

Cancer and its treatment can change the way you feel about yourself (your self esteem). This might be because of physical changes to your body or it might be about less obvious changes.

The intense emotions that cancer can cause might also lower your self esteem. You might feel that you have lost some of your independence and can't do things you used to enjoy.

You might feel so tired and worried that activities you used to find easy now seem too difficult to do. Your future plans might have to be put on hold. You might begin to feel you have no control over your life. All these things can make you feel less confident about who you are and what you do. Having confidence and a healthy self esteem are very important to us all. They play a big part in our sexuality and sex life.

Self esteem also means self satisfaction, self respect and self worth. Many factors can affect these feelings, including illnesses such as cancer that threaten your physical health. Having a low self esteem can affect your quality of life. It can cause long term problems such as depression and anxiety. You are less likely to feel intimate and sexual if you feel depressed or anxious.

It can be very difficult to boost your self esteem when you feel so low. Give yourself some time to come to terms with all you have been through. It will take time to raise your confidence and self esteem again. But it is possible. But there are things that you can do. The most important thing is to talk to someone about how you are feeling. This can be

## Try and Communicate

There are things that can be done to deal with the challenges you face. The important thing is to speak to someone. It can be a relative or friend, or your doctor or nurses. Just talking about your feelings can help you to feel better.

And if you can, communicate with your partner if you have one.

It can be hard to find energy or desire to be intimate with a partner if practical issues are worrying you. It might just feel too overwhelming to try to relax and enjoy sexual activity. But it is important to try and talk to your partner about your concerns and find ways to sort through any problems.

Try to find a quiet time together when you can talk openly and honestly about your worries. Listen to each other and try to find solutions to your problems. Even though it might be difficult to stay calm and talk about problems in a rational manner, you might be surprised at how much it helps. It might even bring you closer together.

If you can, discuss what feels good or doesn't feel good sexually. Share when you are uncomfortable or tired or frustrated or scared when trying to be physically intimate. Sharing your emotions and thoughts might just help you deal with the challenge you're facing.

Also try and speak to others if possible. Professionals involved in your healthcare should be able to share ideas and experiences around body image and sexual health. They will have seen the challenges you are facing before so are well placed to help. There may also be self-help support groups run by and involving people in similar positions to your where you can share your experiences with others.

## Getting Help

Many problems with sex and relationships during and after cancer will get better with time and a little patience. There is help available for you.

Remember problems are very common, even for people who do not have cancer. They are just not always talked about much.

Talking about sex and relationships can be difficult and many people find it very embarrassing. It might take courage to bring the subject up. Sometimes your questions can be answered there and then. If not, or if you feel that your cancer doctor or nurse is uncomfortable talking about sex, then you can ask about finding a counsellor or therapist.

Talking to a psychosexual therapist or counsellors can help you to find ways of overcoming difficulties. You can see a therapist if you are single. And if you are in a relationship, you can go alone or with your partner. It might be useful to talk things through as a couple, if you can.