



## Talking to your healthcare provider about sexual difficulties

### How is this relevant to me?

Your sexual health and sexuality are important parts of your overall health and wellbeing. Adolescence is a stage of life when most people start thinking about sex, who they are sexually attracted to, what their identity is and how they want to express it.

Having cancer won't stop you from experiencing the same sexual feelings or experiences as other young people; however, it might mean that you experience some particular difficulties or have concerns that arise because of your cancer and its related treatments.

### Sexual Difficulties

Sexual difficulties may only become a “problem” when you (and sometimes a sexual partner) identify that your ability to engage in sexual activity is being impacted by these difficulties, or when it is impacting on your physical or emotional wellbeing.

There are many different sexual concerns, the following are just some of the reasons you might visit a health professional to get help:

- pain in your genital areas
- loss of sensation
- changed body image
- vaginal dryness
- losing all interest in engaging in sexual activity (when you would usually be interested)
- not being able to achieve or maintain an erection as well as you might like to
- inability to reach orgasm
- infertility – either temporary or permanent

#### **Why does my doctor need to know?**

A doctor can assist you in finding ways to overcome these issues and to ensure that there is no underlying medical reason causing the concern. It could prevent the issue from developing in to something more serious or long term.



**What if they judge me?**

If you do happen to encounter a health professional who responds negatively when you raise a sexual concern, try not to be discouraged, and seek out a new one. You have a right to judgement-free healthcare. Most health professionals will respond to these concerns in a non-judgemental way and would be happy to help you in any way they can.

**Why would I need to talk to someone about my sexual difficulties?**

Let's face it – many people find talking about sex embarrassing or uncomfortable. For some people it's a very private thing, and having sexual difficulties might make you feel shame or cause you embarrassment or anxiety. If this is the case for you, one of the best things you can do is to make sure you get reliable and accurate information to assist you with your

concern. You can get this by talking to a health professional. Health professionals are bound by strict rules regarding confidentiality and privacy so this means they won't share your information unless legally required to do so.

**Why should I talk to a health professional about my sexual difficulties?**

Often when things go wrong we turn to “Dr Google” or our close friends for answers. This can be helpful if you know which websites offer reliable and accurate information or if you have friends who are experts in the field. However, this can often do more harm than good if the information you receive is from inaccurate or outdated websites and well-meaning (but sometimes uninformed) friends. Health professionals are trained to help you with your specific issues, are aware of the most up-to-date research, and can direct you to accurate information on the web, or refer you to a specialist service. They can also offer you practical advice and information that could help you resolve the issue straight away.

**Resolving Sexual Difficulties yourself:**

You are the expert on your body and on what feels right and/or wrong for you. Taking the time to explore your own body, learning about what feels pleasurable or not, can be a really great way to feel good about yourself and your

**Sexual difficulties are normal and common:**

Sometimes sexual difficulties can arise because of changes in the body due to cancer or cancer treatment, but it is also important to remember that people without cancer also experience sexual difficulties – it is more common than most people think.



sexuality. Trying to think positive thoughts about your body and making yourself feel

‘sexy’ are just a few ways do to this. Self-pleasure (masturbation) can have a positive impact on your sexual health and on certain types of sexual difficulties. Whilst this will not be the solution for everyone, it is risk-free and you might find it helps you to feel less anxious and more positive about your body.

**Remember...**

Health professionals deal with these sorts of issues all the time – it is completely normal to experience sexual difficulties or concerns when you have cancer, and even if you don’t have cancer.

**Overcoming embarrassment! Tips for bringing it up...**

1. Blame it on a friend! E.g. (talk in the third person)  
*- I have a friend undergoing similar treatment to me; he/she is starting to have trouble getting aroused, is this normal?*
2. Write a note to the health professional, then give it to them and ask them to read it (this way you don’t have to actually **say** anything). Ask them to give the note back to you so you can destroy it/keep it safe.
3. Remember it’s completely normal to feel uncomfortable the first time you talk about this sort of stuff – but it usually gets easier each time.

**More information for young people with cancer and their sexuality**

Livestrong website: Fertility information <http://www.livestrong.org/we-can-help/fertility-services/fertility-prepubescent-girls-cancer/>

Planet Cancer, a community of young adults with cancer in their 20s and 30s  
<http://myplanet.planetcancer.org/>

Family Planning NSW [http://www.fpnsw.org.au/index\\_under25s.html](http://www.fpnsw.org.au/index_under25s.html)

Play Safe: a website for young people about sexual health and keeping safe  
<https://playsafe.health.nsw.gov.au/>

ACON Youth <http://www.acon.org.au/youth/sexual-health>

Reach Out <http://au.reachout.com/wellbeing/sex-and-relationships>

Maybe Later Baby <http://www.canteen.org.au/how-we-help/information/a-guide-to-fertility-for-young-people-with-cancer/>



## **Cancer Support for young people**

Canteen <http://www.canteen.org.au/>

Youth Cancer <http://www.youthcancer.com.au/>

Cancer Council NSW <http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/>