



## FACTSHEET



information on **living with breast cancer**

# Sexuality and breast cancer

This factsheet is aimed at women who have breast cancer and who are interested in learning more about how it can affect their sexuality and sex life. Not all women with breast cancer will experience changes in how they feel about sex. Indeed some women find that their sex lives improve because they have been in a situation which made them think about their sexuality, and some people feel closer to their partners as a result. If there are problems, these physical and emotional issues can arise weeks and months after treatment, if not years later. Talking about sex and sexuality can be difficult. You may feel awkward when talking about it with your partner, and more so with your doctor or nurse. By reading this factsheet, it may help you discuss your worries with your partner or a close friend. It also might encourage you to talk openly with your doctor or nurse.

### WHAT IS MEANT BY SEXUALITY?

Sexuality has many different meanings for each of us, and we all have our own individual ways of expressing it. Your sexuality is quite unique to you and involves your physical and emotional feelings. Your social background, cultural and religious beliefs may also influence your sexuality. You can express your sexuality in many different ways – the

clothes you wear, the way you move and speak, as well as by kissing, touching, and how you have sexual intercourse.

### CANCER TREATMENTS AND THEIR EFFECTS

Sexual desire is also called libido. When treated for breast cancer, many women have a loss of libido as the effects of some treatments may affect sexual desire and sexuality. If there are problems these effects, both emotional and physical, may or may not affect you at some stage of your treatment and recovery, they include the following.



## EMOTIONAL EFFECTS OF TREATMENT FOR BREAST CANCER

### 1. Body image and self-esteem

Body image refers to how you think about your body and the way you look. Your breast cancer treatment may bring changes to your body image. When looking at your body, surgery scars, weight loss or gain, skin changes, hair loss or regrowth may be a reminder of your cancer experience. This may fill you with sadness or make you feel less of a woman. Your confidence may be at a low ebb, as a result making you avoid situations where people might comment on your appearance.

Your self-esteem may be affected too. You may no longer feel good about yourself and how you present yourself to the world. If your self-esteem is low or damaged, it can affect how you feel sexually. You may think that your partner finds you less attractive, which may not be the case at all. He/she may be looking for a way to help you, but is not sure where to start. A word from you, even if you find it embarrassing or hard at first, might make all the difference. Take time also to explore other ways to be intimate with your partner and so get used to your new body image.

You may have to cope with the effects of hair loss. This can include body hair such as eyebrows and pubic hair, as a

result of chemotherapy treatments, all of which can affect you as a sexual being. Most women are more comfortable covering up with a wig, scarf or hat until their hair grows back. Your breast care nurse or chemotherapy nurse will talk to you about practical issues such as caring for your scalp or wearing a wig. For more information, call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on freefone 1800 30 90 40.

Breast reconstruction is one way of coping with changes to body image following surgery. Women may decide to have breast reconstruction for reasons related to body image, self-esteem and sexuality. It is possible to have reconstruction done straight after surgery or else months or years later. It is important that any decision you make is right for you. If you would like more information, call the Helpline and ask for a booklet on **Breast Reconstruction**.

Weight loss and weight gain can be side-effects of treatment for breast cancer. This can change the way you look and feel and you may not feel comfortable with these changes. For information on breast cancer and diet, ask for our factsheet on **Diet and Breast Cancer**.

Some women experience lymphoedema (swelling) following surgery to remove lymph nodes in the armpit. This swelling, which contains lymph fluid, may also affect your sexuality. You might be very

conscious of the swelling and be reluctant to have intimate contact or sex.

### 2. Anxiety

Many women with breast cancer experience feelings of anxiety and worry. As a result, you may not want to initiate physical contact or intimacy. Because of changes to your body image, you may feel your partner finds you less attractive and that your relationship is less special than before. Or else you may be anxious about meeting a new partner.

These anxieties will certainly take from your enjoyment of sex. A woman is also less likely to become aroused and reach orgasm if she is anxious and tense.

These feelings are normal and will decrease over time. In the meantime, talking to your partner about your concerns may put your mind at rest. Let others know about your concerns, so that you don't feel you have to cope on your own.

### 3. Depression

Depression can affect some women with breast cancer. It can make you feel sad, low, lonely, and very tired. You may even lose your appetite and have trouble sleeping. Or you may no longer have any interest in your appearance or in sex. Indeed you may take little enjoyment from sex.

If these symptoms persist, you may need specialist help. First talk to your GP or treatment team, who may suggest ways of



helping you at this time, such as counselling, therapy and drug treatments.

#### **4. Fertility**

Breast cancer treatment can affect your fertility too. For younger women, it can be particularly worrying, not knowing if your fertility will return after treatment ends. The issue of long-term infertility may have to be faced. Naturally, this can make you feel quite alone and unable to express the sense of loss you may be experiencing. You may think that your young fertile friends couldn't possibly understand. Facing infertility in this age group may make a woman feel sexually deficient or less attractive. For more information call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on 1800 30 90 40 and ask for a booklet on **Younger Women with Breast Cancer**.

### **PHYSICAL EFFECTS OF TREATMENT FOR BREAST CANCER**

#### **1. Pain and discomfort**

More than likely you will experience some degree of pain or discomfort, regardless of the type of breast cancer treatment you have. Most women have some form of surgery/breast reconstruction, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. It may be difficult to hold or hug your partner, especially if your wounds are still healing or if you have scarring. Your breast area may also be tender and

painful to touch if it has been treated with radiotherapy. Solutions may include taking painkillers and a change in position during lovemaking so there is less direct pressure on your chest.

#### **2. Fatigue**

Fatigue is often experienced when having cancer treatments. It is an extreme form of tiredness, which is not helped by rest or sleep. When feeling fatigued, you may have no desire for sex or perhaps would prefer a less active role. Try not to push yourself. Gradually the fatigue will fade and your energy levels will improve so you can actively enjoy sex again.

#### **3. Menopausal symptoms**

Most women experience menopausal symptoms after the following treatments for breast cancer: chemotherapy, hormone therapy, and ovarian ablation. Ovarian ablation stops the ovaries working either in the short term or long term. Some symptoms may include fatigue, hot flushes, night sweats, mood swings, hair thinning, vaginal dryness or loss of elasticity.

How you feel about yourself as a woman can be affected if you have menopausal symptoms. You may dislike how you look and no longer feel attractive to others. Having night sweats or fatigue may also lessen your interest in sex.

Sometimes younger women being treated for breast cancer have menopausal symptoms

caused by chemotherapy or ovarian ablation. This situation can be either temporary or permanent, with quite severe symptoms at first. As a result, this can make younger women feel older than they are, which may affect their sexuality.

There are some ways to help you deal with menopausal symptoms, particularly if they affect your lifestyle. For more details, see Action Breast Cancer's factsheet on **Menopausal Symptoms and Breast Cancer**.

#### **4. Vaginal changes**

Vaginal changes after treatment for breast cancer, such as dryness and irritation, can result in painful or uncomfortable sex. Vaginal thrush is also common in women having chemotherapy, especially if they are taking steroids or powerful antibiotics to prevent infection. Talk to your doctor about treatment for this problem.

It is best to wear loose-fitting cotton underwear and loose-fitting trousers. In general avoid tight-fitting clothes. Perfumed soap and bath products are also more likely to irritate the vaginal area. Symptoms can be relieved by vaginal moisturisers and lubricants, e.g. Replens MD or Senselle. Apply a water-based lubricant such as KY Gel or Astroglide, if you have discomfort during sex.



## RELATIONSHIP ISSUES

Intimate relationships can change in life, regardless of whether you are treated for breast cancer or not. After treatment, beginning or renewing a sexual relationship may fill you with anxiety and doubts. You may be worried that your partner will make comparisons with the way things were before your diagnosis. Or if you are beginning a new relationship, you may be unsure about how your partner will react to your body. You may be slow to resume any kind of sexual activity, especially if your energy levels are low. It may take some time before you feel emotionally and physically ready for sex.

Not everyone experiences intimate relationships in the same way: they are unique to the individual.

While you may have no desire for sex, you may still want to feel close to your partner. Hugging, kissing, holding hands or even massage may satisfy you, or you may have other special ways to feel close. How you communicate with your partner is vital at this time. Once you and your partner share your feelings and try to support one another, you should be able to enjoy sex and feel fulfilled in time.

There is no perfect time for resuming sex. Do it in your own time and at your own pace, but

don't rush things at first. Naturally, you will feel nervous or anxious about your first sexual experience after your diagnosis.

Your relationship will enter a new phase, as you find ways of adapting to changes arising from your breast cancer. You may have to think about taking painkillers or using different positions so that you feel more comfortable and relaxed. It may take a while for your confidence to return, but there are ways of building it up. You might feel more at ease if the lights are turned down or if your chest area is covered rather than bare. Sex may feel less spontaneous for a while, but you may feel less anxious.

The breasts are an erogenous zone and many women enjoy having them stimulated during sex. Following surgery, the loss of a breast may lessen your enjoyment of sex. Your partner also may have taken pleasure from the look and feel of your breasts. To overcome the sense of loss and feel more sexually fulfilled, you and your partner may want to explore other erogenous zones. Sex toys, e.g. vibrators, can be another way of giving pleasure, if you prefer.

### Partners

Remember that this can be a particularly anxious time for your partner too. He or she will also need time to adjust to your diagnosis and treatment. The way in which your partner now

relates to you sexually will depend on how he or she first reacted to your diagnosis.

Reactions can vary. Many partners just need time to accept your illness. Others may be overprotective and fuss over you to save you from the least distress. Often they will not mention or initiate sex in case it upsets or hurts you. Other partners may find it very difficult to accept a diagnosis of breast cancer. This can be especially stressful for you, as you may feel rejected for a short time or even permanently. The best approach is to try talking to your partner and to explain your feelings. It is quite possible that both of you are assuming how the other is feeling. Both assumptions may be entirely wrong and could be made right by sharing your feelings.

### New partners

At some point after your diagnosis you may begin a new relationship. The prospect then of telling your new partner about your breast cancer can be daunting. You may be unsure about the timing and how to put it into words. However, the more you get to know your partner and the longer you spend in his/her company, the more you can relax and talk about all your life events.

Eventually the time will feel right. Your new partner is likely to react in one of the following ways. At first, it may come as a



shock and he/she may not be as supportive as you had hoped. But having had time to adjust to the news, they may then rally round.

On the other hand, your new partner may be very understanding and recognise that your breast cancer is just one of your many life experiences.

### **THE FUTURE**

Having to cope with both the emotional and physical effects of a breast cancer diagnosis can be very difficult. Naturally, you and your partner will need time to accept any changes arising from your diagnosis. There is

also professional support available from counsellors, psychologists and sex therapists. Ask your medical team for further information.

Because everyone's sexuality is unique, your reaction to your diagnosis is individual to you. Any life experience brings greater knowledge of ourselves and this is true of breast cancer too. Before your diagnosis, you may not have given your sexuality much thought, but now you may know exactly what it means to you. As a result, you may be more able to enjoy and be fulfilled in your sexual relationship.

### **HELP FROM ACTION BREAST CANCER**

Action Breast Cancer, a programme of the Irish Cancer Society, provides breast cancer information and support and funds breast cancer research. Our services are free, confidential and accessible.

For more information call the National Breast Cancer Helpline on 1800 30 90 40 or visit [www.cancer.ie/action](http://www.cancer.ie/action)



## USEFUL ORGANISATIONS

**Action Breast Cancer**  
43 / 45 Northumberland Road  
Dublin 4  
Freefone Helpline:  
1800 30 90 40  
Email: abc@irishcancer.ie

**Irish Cancer Society**  
43 / 45 Northumberland Road  
Dublin 4  
Freefone Helpline:  
1800 200 700  
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie

**Reach to Recovery**  
43 / 45 Northumberland Road  
Dublin 4  
Freefone Helpline:  
1800 30 90 40

**VHI Healthcare**  
*(All correspondence should be sent to  
the postal address in Kilkenny)*  
IDA Business Park, Dublin  
Road, Kilkenny  
**Callsave: 1850 44 44 44**  
Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.  
Saturday 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.  
Website: www.vhi.ie

**Quinn Healthcare**  
Mill House, Fermoy, Co. Cork.  
**LoCall: 1890 89 1890**  
Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m.  
Saturday 10 a.m. to 3.30 p.m.  
Web: www.quinn-  
healthcare.com

**Hibernian Aviva Health**  
*Postal Address*  
PO Box 764, Togher, Co. Cork  
*Head Office*  
One Park Place, Hatch Street,  
Dublin 2  
**CallSave: 1850 717 717**  
Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.  
Website: www.hibernian.ie

## USEFUL WEBSITES

**Irish Cancer Society**  
www.cancer.ie

**Breast Cancer Care UK**  
www.breastcancercare.org.uk

**American Cancer Society**  
www.cancer.org

**The Susan G. Komen  
Foundation**  
www.komen.org

**Europa Donna**  
www.cancereurope.org/  
europadonna

**Lymphodema Ireland**  
www.lymphireland.com

**Manual Lymph Drainage  
Ireland**  
www.mldireland.com

## ABC – ACTION BREAST CANCER

Action Breast Cancer, a programme of the Irish Cancer Society, is the leading provider of breast cancer information and support in Ireland. Each year we reach over 25,000 women who are concerned about breast cancer or breast health. Our services are free and include:

- **National Breast Cancer Helpline** 1800 30 90 40 – staffed by specialist cancer nurses.
- **Patient care programmes** – providing emotional support and practical assistance for those living with breast cancer.
- **Health Promotion** – providing community and workplace programmes on breast awareness and leading a healthy lifestyle.
- **Advocacy** – providing a voice for those affected by breast cancer in Ireland.
- **Professional support** – complementing the services offered by those caring for breast cancer patients.
- **Research** – funding vital Irish research that will have a significant impact on the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer.

ABC is funded entirely by donations from the public. If you would like to support our work or make a donation please contact us.

action  
breast  
cancer

a programme of  
irish cancer society

**Freefone Helpline**  
**1800 30 90 40**

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