

Helping Her  
Manage:

**Sexual Health  
and Intimacy**

**This guide will help you to:**

- Understand how gynecologic cancer and treatment can cause problems with sexuality and intimacy.
- Identify how these problems can affect your loved one and her partner/spouse.
- Develop individualized strategies to help manage these problems better.

## For many, sexual health and intimacy are important parts of well-being and a good quality of life.

Both the diagnosis and treatment of gynecologic cancer can have long-term effects on sexual health.

Physically, treatment may lead to issues with sexual function that can disrupt the sex life of your loved one. Mentally, your loved one may feel different about herself and have anxiety about being sexual. Partners/spouses may be affected in different ways, too. For example, some may worry about causing physical pain or discomfort.

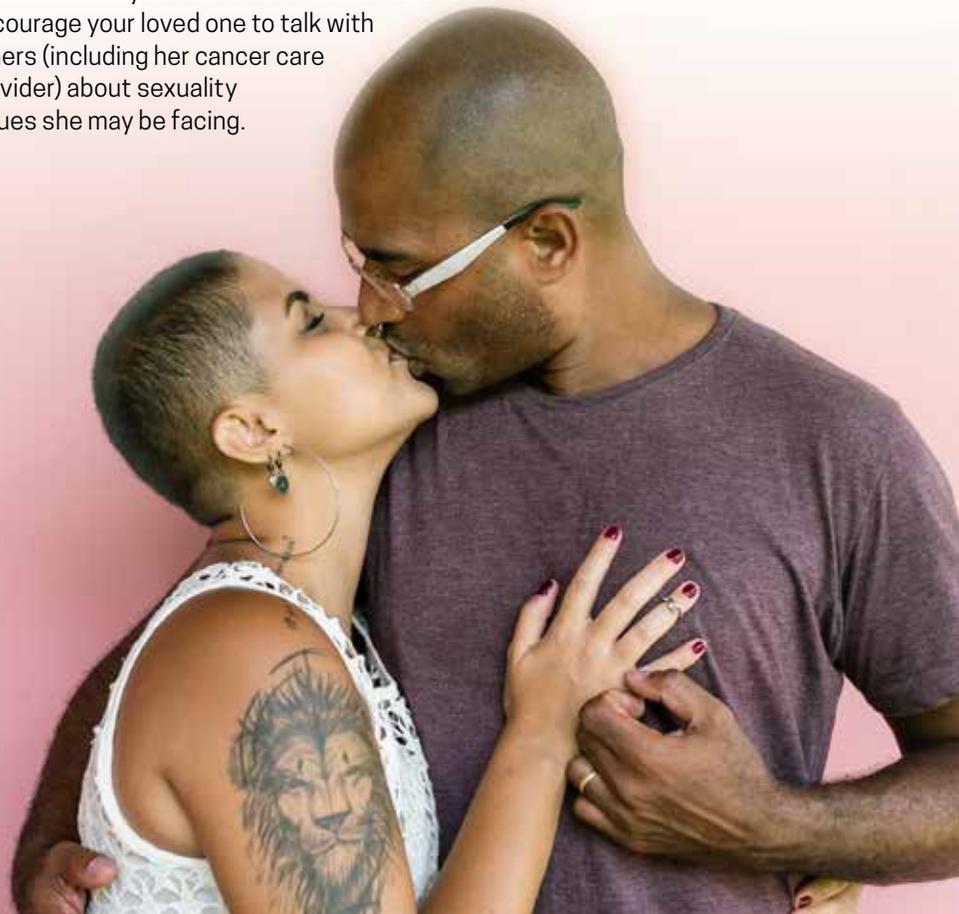
Maintaining a comfortable and satisfying sex life, as well as a positive outlook on her sexuality, can be a source of frustration for your loved one and her partner/spouse. It may be difficult to talk about and get help for these issues.

**If your loved one is your partner/spouse**, this guide will help you to gain a deeper understanding of how gynecologic cancer and treatment can impact her sexually. It offers strategies to help cope with the effects and even to rebuild your sexual relationship.

**If your loved one is your parent, sibling, family member, or friend**, then this guide can help you to understand what she may be going through. If needed, it is something you can share with your loved one. You can also encourage your loved one to talk with others (including her cancer care provider) about sexuality issues she may be facing.

Where there is love  
there is life.

-Mahatma Gandhi



## How Do Those With Gynecologic Cancer Describe Problems With Sexual Health and Intimacy?

Below are common ways that your loved one's sexual health may be affected by a gynecologic cancer diagnosis and surgery, radiation, and/or chemotherapy treatment. Is your loved one experiencing any of these? It may be helpful to ask for her input.

### What about you?

Check off any items that your loved one may be experiencing. Write in anything else related to sexual health and intimacy that she may be going through.

- Lack of interest in sex/loss of libido
- Difficult or painful intercourse
- Vaginal dryness, irritation, and/or burning
- Difficulty reaching orgasm
- Fear or anxiety around having sex
- Worry that sex may cause bleeding, be painful, or feel very different
- Fear of changes in her body or body image
- Worry about hair loss and her appearance
- Worry about weight gain or weight loss
- Feelings of embarrassment or rejection
- Worry about sexual relationship with partner/spouse

# What Causes Sexual Health and Intimacy Problems?

## Types of Gynecologic Cancers

The various types of gynecologic cancer and treatments can affect your loved one's sexual health in different ways.



### Definition:

#### Hysterectomy

The surgical removal of the uterus, which may also involve removal of the cervix, ovaries (*salpingo-oophorectomy*), and other surrounding tissue.

Most gynecologic cancer treatment involves surgery. For several gynecologic cancers, especially ovarian, endometrial/uterine, and cervical, a *hysterectomy* is a key part of treatment. If the surgery also removes the ovaries—the primary source of estrogen—women will experience the effects of very low estrogen levels. These effects include hot flashes and vaginal dryness in premenopausal women and a worsening of these symptoms in those who were already postmenopausal.

Surgery for vulvar cancer can be distressing and people describe changes in self-confidence and body image, along with fear of pain with intercourse, depression, and psychological distress.

In addition to the effects of surgery, many women with gynecologic cancer also receive chemotherapy and/or radiation therapy. Side effects of chemotherapy (nausea and vomiting, fatigue, hair loss) and radiation therapy (fatigue, physical changes to the vagina) can present many challenges to sexual health, interest, and satisfaction for patients and their partners.

## Common Causes

Symptoms of the cancer itself and side effects of its treatment can interfere with your loved one's sexual health and her ability to have sex or be intimate. These may include fatigue, nausea and vomiting, pain, sleep problems, anxiety and depression, and the ability to become aroused. Some specific common causes include:

**Vaginal pain and discomfort.** Surgery, radiation and/or chemotherapy can affect the length of the vagina and its ability to stretch during intercourse. This can make intercourse painful. Irritation, burning, and discomfort can be caused by vaginal dryness (from low estrogen levels) or from other reasons.

**Loss of desire.** Some medicines, such as anti-depressants, can reduce libido (desire to have sex).



**Talk with your HCP if you have any of these symptoms.**



**Ability to become aroused.** Surgery for gynecologic cancer may affect the nerves responsible for arousal or orgasm, but not always. Depending on the type of cancer and surgery, women who could achieve an orgasm before surgery may not have problems after surgery. However, hormonal, physical, and emotional changes may make it harder to trigger sexual arousal.

**Ostomy surgery.** An ostomy, or stoma, is an opening that is surgically created to allow waste products such as urine or stool to leave the body. Abdominal ostomies do not necessarily interfere with sexual function, but can impact your loved one's body image.

**Hair loss.** Chemotherapy may cause hair loss on the head and body, including eyebrows, arms, armpits, legs, and genitals. Hair loss may lead to feelings that affect body image and sexuality. Usually, hair returns several months after treatment ends. It may be a different color, texture, or volume.

**Weight gain or loss.** Weight gain for gynecologic cancer patients can be caused by chemotherapy, hormone therapy, cancer drugs that make the body retain water, eating more, and exercising less. Weight loss can result from chemotherapy or treatments that affect appetite and sense of taste, making food unappealing. Weight loss and/or weight gain can impact body image and sexuality.

**Emotional changes.** Any or all of the above can lead to anxiety and fear about being sexual during cancer and treatment, and resuming sexual relations after surgery. These can cause some to have feelings of lowered self-esteem, embarrassment, or fear of rejection.

“

I am not having sex at all. I'm not interested and too afraid it will be painful, and I don't really know how to approach my husband anymore.

”

# YOUR THOUGHTS

In what ways have sexuality and intimacy problems affected your loved one?

---

---

---

---

---

---

If you as the caregiver are a partner/spouse to your loved one, how do these problems affect you?

---

---

---

What are some of the biggest barriers to managing these problems?

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) \_\_\_\_\_

Now, let's explore some strategies and ways to help you overcome these barriers.

# Strategies for Managing Sexual Health and Intimacy

If you are your loved one's partner/spouse, there are many strategies to help her (and you) regain a healthy sexual and intimate relationship after a cancer diagnosis. Pick those that you think may work for you and your loved one. Some strategies are for her to try, and some you can try together. Others require help from her cancer care provider. It may be hard to bring up, but it's important to let her cancer care provider know if she and/or you are struggling with sexual or intimacy problems. They can help to find the cause and suggest the best treatment.

## Managing Vaginal Dryness and Discomfort

If vaginal dryness, burning, and/or irritation is keeping your loved one from enjoying sex, a variety of over-the-counter solutions are available at drug stores, supermarkets, and online (try Amazon or [www.drugstore.com](http://www.drugstore.com)). Be sure to read labels and talk with her cancer care provider about products she may choose to use.

**Lubricants.** Choose water- or silicone-based lubricants. Avoid anything oil-based (petroleum jelly or Vaseline®) or with perfumes or dyes. Never use products in the vaginal area that have a warning to avoid the eyes. Some usage tips include:

- Place the container under hot water, wrap it in a heating pad, or warm between the hands before use for greater comfort.
- Apply lubricant during foreplay. As her partner/spouse, ask if she would like you to apply it around her clitoris and vaginal entrance. Apply lubricant to anything that penetrates the vagina. Lubrication suppositories are also available and melt during foreplay.
- Keep lubricant nearby when you have intercourse so it can be easily reapplied if needed.

**Moisturizers.** Over-the-counter vaginal moisturizers such as Replens™, K-Y® Liquibeads, Lubrin®, and Astroglide® Silken Secret can be used either in addition to or in place of lubricants. These have been shown to improve vaginal moisture, stretchiness, and acidity. The recommended use is 3 times per week at bedtime, inserted into the vagina using a tampon-like applicator.

Note that moisturizers may increase vaginal discharge for some, but this side effect generally goes away after 2 weeks of regular use.



### Helpful Tip:

#### Choose the right lubricant

Lubricants that are thin liquids are similar to the body's natural lubrication. There are a number of brands available:

Astroglide®

Probe®

K-Y® Liquid

ID Glide®

Slippery Stuff®

Sylk®

Aqua Lube®

Other products such as K-Y Jelly or Surgilube® are thicker and tend to dry out more quickly.



### Helpful Tip:

#### Kegel Exercises

Follow these quick tips to get started doing Kegel exercises regularly:

- 1) Begin by emptying the bladder.
- 2) Tighten the pelvic floor muscles and hold for a count of 10.
- 3) Relax the muscle completely for a count of 10. Repeat 10 times.
- 4) Do the set of 10 exercises at least 3 times a day (morning, afternoon, and night).

Visit the Mayo Clinic for more instructions on how to properly do Kegel exercises: [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)

**Hormone replacement therapy.** In some cases, doctors may consider vaginal estrogen replacement to treat vaginal dryness. These prescription-only products include vaginal estrogen creams (such as Premarin®), tablets (such as Vagifem®), or rings (such as Estring®). Talk with her cancer care provider if either of you have questions about whether this would be recommended for your loved one.

## Managing Pain with Intercourse

If your partner/spouse experiences pain during intercourse, discuss this with her cancer care provider. Here are some ways to manage the pain:

**Using a dilator.** A vaginal dilator works by gently stretching the vagina over time. There are many options available—start with a small dilator and progress to larger diameters. Use at least 3 times per week by inserting into the vagina, then moving sideways and in and out for approximately 10 to 15 minutes. Gentle intercourse can also help with stretching the vagina and can be substituted as a dilator session. Slowly increase the depth of penetration over time as tolerated. Using lubrication can ease insertion and add comfort. Ask the cancer care provider if a dilator might be helpful.

**Pelvic floor exercises.** Muscles play an important role in sexual function. *Pelvic floor physical therapy rehabilitation* may reduce pelvic pain from intercourse and increase the ability to have pleasurable sensations. This uses biofeedback and exercises to relax and strengthen muscles of the lower pelvis. Talk with her cancer care provider about a referral.

Encourage trying *Kegel* exercises to strengthen pelvic and vaginal muscles. Research shows that Kegel exercises are the best treatment for strength and awareness of these muscles when done correctly and consistently.

**Experiment with your partner.** It is important to keep the sensual and sexual part of your relationship nourished even if you're not having intercourse. Create sexual pleasure in ways that are not painful to your partner/spouse, which may or may not lead to orgasm or intercourse. She could try self-touch or a vibrator (wand or handheld type, instead of penis-shaped) gently near the clitoris or vaginal entrance to see what feels good to her.

**Medicines.** Talk with your loved one's cancer care provider about medicines for pain or to treat other symptoms that are interfering with intimacy and sexuality. Encourage her to take her pain or nausea medicines an hour before sex if she thinks this may help with how she feels during sex.

## Managing Changes in Appearance

Changes in appearance due to cancer, surgery, and treatment can be upsetting for you and your loved one. While these changes may not be dangerous, they are a visible reminder of her illness, which can cause distress, feelings of insecurity, and issues with how she feels sexually. Learning the best ways to manage these changes will help both of you cope in a better way.

**Ostomy surgery.** If your loved one has an ostomy, she will have a stoma. Sex is not likely to cause any harm to her stoma. Ostomy can cause vaginal dryness (see the previous section “Managing Vaginal Dryness and Discomfort” in this guide). Some women who have an ostomy report feeling embarrassed and worried about rejection from their partner. However, an ostomy does not have to end this important part of her life. Try to remember to be patient, warm, and kind toward each other. If you or your partner has concerns about her ostomy and sexual activity, talk with her cancer care provider. You can also learn more about intimacy and sexuality with an ostomy at the American Cancer Society.

**Hair loss.** Hair loss can be a distressing side effect for women. It is an obvious physical change that can affect their self-image. There is currently no way to prevent hair loss from chemotherapy, so management strategies instead focus on dealing with these changes, such as:

- **Talk to someone.** Feeling less confident and attractive, lower self-esteem, avoiding social interactions—if your loved one feels this way, talk with her cancer care provider about how to keep hair loss from interfering with her quality of life.
- **Prepare.** Knowing what to expect in terms of hair loss can offer some feeling of control. Before your partner/spouse begins a new chemotherapy, ask her cancer care provider whether she is likely to lose her hair and when hair loss is likely to start.
- **Find solutions.** It can be helpful to shop for a wig or head coverings before hair loss begins. She may choose a wig that matches her own hairstyle, color, and texture, or try a new look. She may opt to use hats or scarves instead of a wig. Some women cut their hair into a shorter style before hair loss starts.

*Keep in mind that there is no one “right” way for everyone. What’s most important is that your loved one feels comfortable with her choices of how to manage hair loss.*

**Weight gain or loss.** If your loved one has weight changes with cancer and/or treatment, she may have a hard time feeling good about herself and her body image. She might feel less sexually attractive and have fatigue or depression that lowers interest in sex. Try not to let your loved one judge



### Ostomies

Learn more at the American Cancer Society: [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org). Type “ostomy” in the search feature to find a range of helpful links to different topics, including ostomies and sexuality.

Or, call the helpline to have a live conversation: 800-227-2345

### Hair Loss

There are many resources to help you and your loved one with hair loss:

National Ovarian Cancer Coalition:  
[www.ovarian.org](http://www.ovarian.org)

American Cancer Society:  
[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

Look Good, Feel Better:  
[lookgoodfeelbetter.org](http://lookgoodfeelbetter.org)

Free instruction on scarves, scarf-tying, wigs, and makeup from professional licensed hair stylists.

CancerCare:  
[www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or  
1-800- 813-HOPE

Free, professional support services and support groups over the phone or online.



### Learn More

Go to the guide **Helping Her Manage: Nutrition** in this series to learn more about creating healthy eating habits.

herself or her appearance. Encourage her to be good to herself (suggest special outfits, bubble baths, massages). Focus on what she likes most about her looks.

**Feeling guilty as a partner/spouse.** Changes in her appearance can also affect you. You may feel upset or uncomfortable about these changes, even knowing they are a part of treatment. Caregivers often feel guilty about reacting this way—this is very normal. Hopefully, knowing that you're not alone helps you feel less guilty about your reactions. You may consider talking to a counselor or other supportive mental health professional.

## Managing Anxiety or Fear

It is very common for patients and their partners/spouses to feel anxiety or fear about resuming sexual relations after gynecologic cancer surgery or other treatment. Being concerned about pain or the possibility of causing harm is a natural response. Talk with her cancer care provider about when it's safe to resume sexual activity. Address any other physical and emotional issues she may be having. You can try these tips for a more positive sexual experience after surgery:

- Allow plenty of time for foreplay and sexual arousal before intercourse. This will ensure that her vagina is moist enough and will help to reduce anxiety.
- Find a comfortable position. A side-lying or woman-on-top position allows her to control the depth of penetration and reduces the amount of pressure on her abdomen and/or surgical scar.
- If a position is uncomfortable, try different positions to find one that is most comfortable.

## Managing Low Sexual Interest and Arousal

Loss of interest or desire for sex is also common for those with gynecologic cancer. This can stem from physical, hormonal, and/or emotional changes. Whatever the reason, your partner/spouse is not alone. Talk with her cancer care provider about this issue. You can also experiment with ways to increase desire and improve her experience during sex, such as:

- Plan for intimacy by scheduling a "date night."
- If she has low energy or fatigue, encourage her to nap or rest prior to your "date," or try having sex when her energy level is up (perhaps in the A.M.).
- Set the mood for intimacy (soft music, candles, favorite movies, or lingerie).
- Follow advice on lubrication, foreplay, and positions discussed in previous sections.
- Encourage practicing Kegel exercises. Research suggests this can improve the ability to reach orgasm.





## How to Talk With a Spouse/Partner About Sexual Health and Intimacy Problems

If you were comfortable with and enjoyed sex or intimacy before starting therapy, chances are you will still find pleasure during and after therapy. Talking with your partner/spouse to find ways to meet both of your needs is an important step in renewing your sexuality. Here are some helpful suggestions:

- Talk about your needs and wants in a supportive and sensitive way.
- Seek help from a professional if it's difficult for you to talk with your partner about sex (such as a counselor, therapist, psychiatrist, social worker, marriage counselor, sex therapist, or clergy).
- Ask her cancer care provider for a referral to someone who specializes in sexuality after a cancer diagnosis.
- Continue expressing love and physical affection, especially during times when sexual activity is limited. Hugging, touching, holding, and other intimate activities can be a key aspect of sexuality.

Other tips for caregivers include:

- Join a support group for caregivers of women with gynecologic cancer through the National Ovarian Cancer Coalition's Teal Cares Network, or try connecting with other caregivers and cancer survivors on websites, such as the American Cancer Society's Cancer Survivors Network.
- Talk to her cancer care provider about whether any of her medications could affect her libido (sexual desire).
- Talk to her cancer care provider if you feel that depression may be affecting your loved one's sexuality.

“

This has been really hard on our relationship. We don't really have an intimate relationship, it just kinda never gets talked about.”

”



National Ovarian Cancer Coalition's Teal Cares Network: [ovarian.org/find-support/i-am-a-caregiver/caregiver-support](https://www.ovarian.org/find-support/i-am-a-caregiver/caregiver-support)

American Cancer Society's Cancer Survivors Network: [csn.cancer.org](https://www.csn.cancer.org)

## QUICK REFERENCE

Below is a recap of the general strategies that can help you as a caregiver manage your loved one's sexual health and intimacy problems. You can use this page as a quick reference.

- Consider the different ways to manage vaginal dryness, burning, and irritation using lubricants, moisturizers, or hormone therapy. (Page 17:7)
- Manage pain with intercourse through dilators, pelvic floor exercises, other ways of being intimate, and medicines. (Page 17:8)
- Understand how changes in appearance due to ostomy surgery, hair loss, and weight fluctuation can cause emotional distress. Explore solutions to these changes. (Page 17:9)
- Experiment with ways to alleviate anxiety and fear surrounding sex after surgery. (Page 17:10)
- Try suggestions to increase sexual desire and make sex more comfortable for your loved one. (Page 17:10)
- Communicate with your loved one about your sex life, talk with her cancer care provider and other specialists if needed. Seek support from in-person and online support groups. (Page 17:11)

### Resources & Links

- Lubricants and moisturizers: 1) [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com), 2) [www.drugstore.com](http://www.drugstore.com)
- Kegel pelvic floor exercises: [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)
- Ostomy surgery: [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) or call 800-227-2345
- Hair loss: 1) [www.ovarian.org](http://www.ovarian.org), 2) [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org), 3) [lookgoodfeelbetter.org](http://lookgoodfeelbetter.org), 4) [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or call 1-800-813-HOPE
- Online cancer caregiver support groups:
  - [ovarian.org/find-support/i-am-a-caregiver/caregiver-support](http://ovarian.org/find-support/i-am-a-caregiver/caregiver-support)
  - [csn.cancer.org](http://csn.cancer.org)
- Local cancer support groups: [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) or call 800-227-2345

# YOUR GOALS & STRATEGIES

What strategies make the most sense to you? How can you and your family use those strategies in your own life?

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Create a Plan:**

Think about specific goals you want to accomplish. Just tackle one or two goals at a time.

**My goal is to \_\_\_\_\_** (what do you hope will happen) **by \_\_\_\_\_** (timeframe) **so that \_\_\_\_\_** (why it's important).

---

---

---

**What specific strategies will you use to reach your goal? Think about the very next steps you can take to get started.**

---

---

---

---

---

---