

SOME IDEAS TO GET YOUR SEX LIFE BACK ON TRACK!

Sexual concerns are normal following a diagnosis of cancer – there are many things that you can do to get your sex life back on track. Try to be open-minded when you consider these suggestions:

- **Maintain a healthy lifestyle** – try to remain physically active, even if this means going for just a short walk.
- **Avoid tobacco** and limit your use of alcohol and other drugs. Talk to your doctors about whether treatments or any medication you are taking could be affecting your sexual functioning.
- **Don't rush things** – it may be many months before you are interested in or well enough to think about sex after being unwell. This is normal. There are many different things that you and your partner can do to maintain the intimacy in your relationship during this time. Take the pressure off yourselves by enjoying kissing, non-sexual touching, massage and intimate time together without expecting it to lead to intercourse. Remember that physical pleasure is probably only one aspect of the enjoyment you get from being with your partner – how you feel about your partner is a large source of pleasure.
- Arrange to spend pleasant time with your partner or **plan a 'date'**. Think about what you used to enjoy doing together and arrange to do these things again. Increasing the enjoyable time you spend together will help you and your partner feel closer. Sexual 'foreplay' occurs 24 hours a day – not only during the half-hour before sex!
- If you are not feeling attractive or desirable you may want **to improve how you feel about your appearance**. Disguising changes to your appearance, wearing new clothes, trying a new hairstyle, exercising and eating well, can all increase your confidence.
- **Give yourselves time** – plan time together for your sexual relationship and set aside an afternoon or evening when you won't be disturbed (rather than squeezing time in between other commitments). Plan sexual activity for when you are feeling your best during the day. If you need medication, take it 30 minutes before sexuality activity. Good sex does not always need to be spontaneous.
- **Pay attention to all of your senses** – a pleasant environment, candles, music, a warm room and a glass of wine may help. It may take longer to become aroused than in the past. Ensure the goal is to enjoy the pleasure of being together, physical closeness, intimacy and emotionally connecting, irrespective of whether this leads further.
- **Anxiety and worries are normal** for both you and your partner when first resuming your sexual relationship. Talk to your partner – let them know how you are currently feeling emotionally and physically. Communicate your likes and dislikes – these may have changed. Your partner may have concerns about whether you are well enough to have sex or concerns about hurting you. Don't expect things to go back to how they were before – you and your partner may need to relearn what is pleasurable for each other. See sex as a time to share, not to perform.

- **Communicate with each other** about what is comfortable and pleasurable. Use pillows and try different sexual positions to find out what is most comfortable and pleasurable. If you feel discomfort or pain stop what you are doing – you may need to work out ideas to prevent this happening again or seek professional advice. Some physical changes following the cancer treatments may be permanent and it may be helpful to speak to a professional about achieving a satisfactory sex life despite such changes.
- A lack of sexual interest or arousal can be helped by **using sexual fantasies, reading material or watching erotic films**. Think back to what aroused you in the past and use these strategies again. Recall past pleasurable sexual experiences – when did they happen? What was good about them? How can you recreate them?
- **Pay close attention to what you are thinking and feeling** – if you are worrying about something, feeling unwell or unsure in your relationship it is unlikely that sex will be good. Concerns that you are not ready for sex, that it won't be the same or that it may hurt will increase your anxiety. In addition, feelings of depression or anxiety can have a large impact on how you feel about sex and you may need help to deal with emotional changes.
- Learn more about sexuality and the impact of illness by **reading self-help books** and accessing available resources through your treatment team, cancer services or the Internet.
- Remember to **look at the positives** about what you can enjoy and about what gives you and /or your partner pleasure rather than comparing everything with how it used to be. A sense of humour will always help! Everything may not get back to how it was before, but there will always be things that you and/or your partner can do that are pleasurable.

If you feel you need some extra ideas, ask your treatment team or local doctor for assistance or for a referral to a specialist service.

Extracted from: Hodgkinson, Katharine, 'Addressing Sexual and Body Image Concerns' in Hodgkinson, Dr Katharine; Gilchrist, Dr Jemma (eds), *Psychosocial Care of Cancer Patients: A Health Professional's Guide to What to Say and Do*, Ausmed Publications (2008, Melbourne), 146, 147.

Disclaimer: This publication contains a variety of content on health and medical issues for general education and informative purposes only. The content of this publication is not diagnostic or prescriptive and does not replace the service or advice of a qualified health care professional. The Publisher does not purport to give any medical advice and is not qualified to do so. While the Publisher has taken every care to ensure the accuracy of the professional, clinical, and technical components of this publication, it accepts no responsibility for any loss or damages suffered by any person as a result of following the procedures described or acting on information set out in this publication. To the extent permitted by law, the Publisher expressly disclaims responsibility for and liability in respect of, the accuracy of the content in this publication.