Sexuality, intimacy and breast cancer

In a perfect world, every relationship would provide the intimacy a person needs to feel happy and secure. In the real world, breast cancer can sometimes make it difficult to have sex. At times, you may only want to be intimate with your partner. At other times, you may want both, or neither. That’s okay and quite normal.

Breast cancer does not have to mean the end of sexuality and intimacy. Rather, it can be a new beginning.

How to talk with your partner

If it was hard for you and your partner to talk about sex before you got breast cancer, it will still be difficult, if not harder now. While there is no such thing as the perfect time to talk, some times are better than others. Choose a moment when you are alone and relaxed. When you feel comfortable, give yourself and your partner permission to talk about your feelings, both good and bad. Above all else, be honest. Talking about each other’s fears allows you to reassure each other. You may want to try talking about:

- **Your biggest fears** — You may be afraid your partner will reject or leave you because of your breast cancer. You may not feel desirable or worry that your partner finds you less attractive.

- **Your partner’s fears** — Your partner may be afraid of physically hurting you during sex. Partners may be confused or unsure of the best way to show support and affection. They may retreat or wait for cues from you about when to resume an intimate or sexual relationship.

- **Birth control** — Pregnancy should be avoided while you are undergoing radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hormone therapy or targeted therapy as these treatments can cause birth defects. It is important to talk to your partner about birth control. After treatment, do not assume that you can no longer become pregnant.

- **Your “new” sex life** — Breast cancer may change what you like to do and how you like to be touched during sex. You may not even want to have sex for a while. Your partner may not know this unless you talk about it. You may find your partner is willing to do anything that will make you happy.

For more information, visit komen.org or call Susan G. Komen's breast care helpline at 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636) Monday through Friday, 9 AM to 10 PM ET.
Why don't you...

Get romantic
Bring some romance back into your life. Plan a candlelight dinner. Take a bubble bath. Take the time to nurture your relationship.

Go slow
Don’t feel you need to have sex all the time. Kissing and touching can also provide pleasure.

Get comfortable
Sex may now be painful. A water-based lubricant just before sex might help.

To help with vaginal dryness, try an estrogen-free vaginal moisturizer. These products are available without a prescription.

Looking in the mirror
Breast cancer may change the way you look. It can also change the way you feel about yourself. While most women agree that their breasts are only part of what defines them as a woman, they may still be deeply affected by the change in or loss of their breast(s).

A woman’s breasts symbolize so many things — motherhood, sexuality and just being a woman. But for some women, breasts also now represent cancer. Most women, and their partners, will need to take time to grieve the loss of their breast(s).

Joining a support group may help you cope with all the changes in your body and self-image. Some women find these changes difficult. Others find strength in their new image of themselves. Remind yourself that healing takes time. At some point, you will become more comfortable with your body. Accepting yourself as you are is part of the process.

Resources
Susan G. Komen®
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists (AASECT)
202-449-1099
www.aasect.org

International Society for the Study of Women’s Sexual Health (ISSWSH)
847-517-7225
www.isswsh.org

Related fact sheets in this series:
• Support After A Breast Cancer Diagnosis
• Talking With Your Partner

The above list of resources is only a suggested resource and is not a complete listing of breast cancer materials or information. The information contained herein is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional. Komen does not endorse, recommend or make any warranties or representations regarding the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, quality or non-infringement of any of the materials, products or information provided by the organizations referenced herein.

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