

Managing Symptoms After Prostate Cancer

Sexual Side Effects

Changes in a man's sex life are common and can be managed.

Prostate cancer and its treatment often bring changes in a man's sex life, especially in sex drive and erections. Even without prostate cancer, getting older and having health problems can cause changes. Prostate cancer and its treatment may increase them. The good news is that you and your partner can still enjoy sex.



What changes are most likely and why do they happen?

Changes in your sex drive.

Your feelings about having cancer and concerns about the treatment side effects can lower your interest in sex.

- It's common for men and their partners to feel worried, sad, or tired even before cancer treatment starts. This makes it hard to think about sex and pleasure.
- Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation, hormones, and medications (such as those for pain, nausea, or depression) can also lower sex drive.

In time, your interest in sex may return, especially as your feelings about cancer ease.

Changes in erections.

Prostate cancer treatments may change a man's ability to have or keep an erection. Treatment may cause damage to nerves or blood vessels, preventing blood from going into the penis to make it hard.

- *After prostate surgery*, erections are usually weak for the first few months.

They may improve over the next year or two if the nerves near the prostate were not removed. Erections return more easily if a man is under age 65 when surgery is done.

- *After radiation treatments*, erections gradually decrease in firmness. This may develop even years after treatment.
- *After hormone treatments*, changes caused by the treatments may disappear in a few weeks to months after the end of treatment, unless the treatment lasted a very long time such as several years.

Changes in orgasms.

After prostate cancer treatments, men experience "dry orgasms." They do not ejaculate fluid. They still feel the pleasure of orgasm, but little or no fluid (semen) is released. This is because the prostate gland is no longer making the fluid that mixes with sperm.

Some men miss having an ejaculation. Feelings of loss or sadness are normal.

How do men and their partners deal with sexual changes and concerns?

Here are tips to deal with sexual changes. Keep in mind that prostate cancer cannot be spread to your partner. Your partner cannot “catch it” from having intercourse, kissing, or other intimate contact with you.

- *Talk openly and honestly with your partner.* It’s not easy to talk about sexual concerns, but sharing your feelings and needs will make it easier for both of you. Encourage your partner to read this information and to talk to you about it.
- *Plan sexual activities for times when you’re well rested.* Empty your bladder before sex. If you’re worried about leaking urine, wear a condom. Take your time.
- *Be willing to try new ways to stay close and share intimacy.* Many couples share sexual intimacy and pleasure without intercourse. Hugging, kissing, cuddling, and holding hands can help you stay close. Lying next to each other, making skin-to-skin contact, can be intimate and loving.
- *Be creative in ways that suit you and your partner.*
 - Caresses with your hands, lips or tongue can be very pleasurable
 - Orgasms can occur from hand caressing or oral sex for both partners.
 - Vibrators can increase pleasure for both partners. They increase blood flow which is healthy for the parts of your body involved in sex. You can buy them online



at web sites with good reputations that will not sell your name to mailing lists. The University of Michigan Center for Sexual Health has a fact sheet about vibrators. You can access the information at <http://www.med.umich.edu/sexualhealth/vibrators.pdf>

- *Discuss all your medicines with your health care team.* Certain medicines, even those you buy over the counter, can cause problems with erections.

Treatments for Erection Problems

Talk with your doctor. If you had prostate surgery, ask your doctor about “penile rehabilitation.” This treatment helps give a man the best chance of restoring firmer erections after surgery. Rehabilitation may include using pills, urethral pellets, injections, and mechanical devices to stimulate blood flow.

For any man having problems with erections, you can ask your doctor whether the treatments listed below might work for you. They all require a prescription. They all have some side effects. Some cannot be used if you are taking certain heart medicines.

Most treatments for erection problems involve some hassles. Having support from your partner and keeping your expectations reasonable will help. A realistic goal is to have erections firm enough for intercourse.

Treatment — Medications taken by mouth. There are 3 common pills for erection problems:

- Viagra (generic name: sildenafil citrate)
- Cialis (tadalafil)
- Levitra (vardenafil)

These will help you get an erection with sexual stimulation. They do not cause an erection all by themselves. They work best if surgery did not remove the nerves, or when you have partial erections and just need more firmness.

Treatment — Medications used in the penis (generic name: Alprostadil).

- MUSE is a small pellet which is inserted into the opening of the penis. The pellet melts and the medicine is absorbed. If it works, an erection will begin within 8-10 minutes and last from 30-60 minutes.
- Caverject is the same medicine as MUSE,

but is injected into the base of the penis. The needles are tiny and cause very little pain. Erections last between 40-60 minutes. Both of these treatments must be tried in the clinic with a doctor or nurse so the correct dose can be found for you.

Treatment — A vacuum erection device (VED). This is a device used to bring blood into the penis to create an erection. Here’s how it works.

1. The soft penis is placed inside a plastic tube attached to a pump.
2. The pump creates a vacuum that draws blood into the penis.
3. A ring is placed at the base of the penis to keep blood from leaving.
4. The ring is removed within 30-40 minutes to allow the blood to flow out.

Some men feel the VED interferes with foreplay. But on the positive side, this is an erection aid that produces a firm erection in almost all men with the fewest side effects. Some, but not all men will be able to have an orgasm using this device.

Treatment — Penile implants. A penile implant requires surgery in which a pair of cylinders are placed inside the penis. These are inflated with water to create an artificial erection.

Surgery for an implant permanently removes tissue inside the penis and damages a man’s natural ability to have erections. Recovery from the surgery takes from 1–3 weeks. Most men prefer to try other treatments before considering this option. Men with implants can have orgasms. Penile implants also help to have more spontaneous sex.

If you wish to consider this treatment, ask your doctor about different models of implants.

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Health professionals help men and their partners with sexual concerns every day. Be sure to talk with your healthcare team when:

- *You have questions or concerns about your sexual functioning. A referral to a certified sex therapist may help you and your partner.*
- *You want to try a different treatment for erection problems.*
- *The treatment does not satisfy you or your partner.*



Even though couples may experience changes in their sex life following prostate cancer treatment, there are ways for them to continue to enjoy sex and have a close relationship.



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This fact sheet contains general information and is not meant to replace consultation with your doctor or nurse.

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