

Support for the Spouses/Partners

of Prostate Cancer Patients

For men with partners, prostate cancer is a “couple’s illness.”

Prostate cancer creates stress for both patients and partners. Partners usually want to provide support for the patient. But, often, partners don’t feel prepared. They may lack information and might need help with their own feelings. Everyone is stressed, and partners need help and support as much as the patient.

When a partner feels supported, that helps the cancer patient too. If a couple works as a team, they can handle the illness better. It’s very important that the patient and partner show that they care about each other.

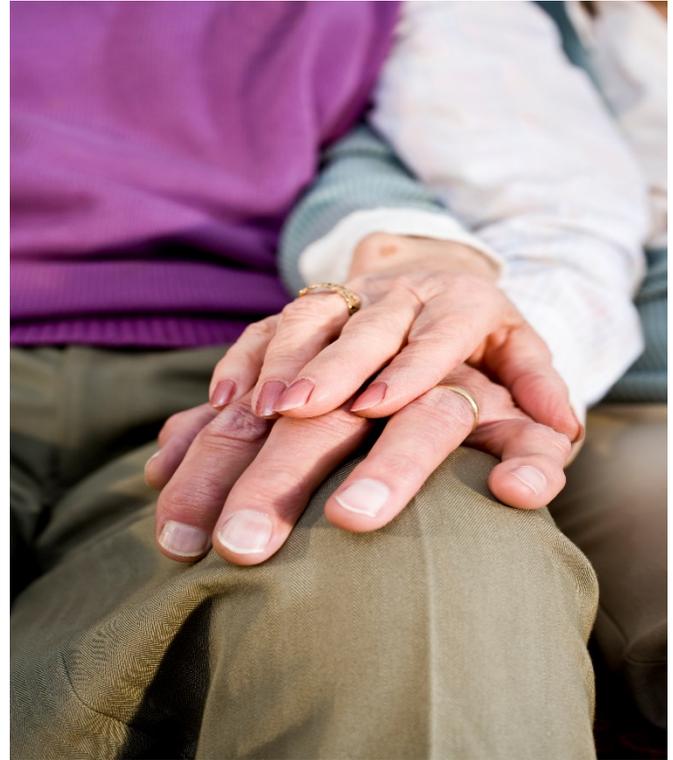
Most partners need information, communication, and support.

Information:

Partners need a chance to learn about cancer and cancer treatment.

Without information, they feel left out and unable to help. Both a patient and his partner need to learn about:

- Treatment options and the pros and cons of each option
- The effect on length of survival and their quality of life
- Likely side effects and how to cope with them
- How the cancer and treatment related symptoms may affect their feelings and emotions



- Survivorship care plan that includes a treatment summary and summary information
- Other programs besides routine cancer care that might help improve overall health

Partners and patients can use these tips to get informed.

- Attend medical visits together. The partner can help by taking notes or using a tape recorder to record the visit. Many couples find that using a binder-type notebook helps them keep records of visits, tests, and treatments in one place.

Support for the Spouses/Partners

If your partner works or you have children, help arrange time off or childcare so you can both attend medical visits.

- Develop a question list before medical visits. Most people find that writing questions down in advance helps to remember them at the visit. Partners can ask their own questions as well. Let doctors know that all information can be shared with the partner.
- Support each other in finding information in print, online, or at support groups.
- Ask your children or grandchild to help gather information online if you don't know how to use a computer or do not have access to the internet.
- Ask your healthcare team for helpful pamphlets and websites.
- Support each other in dealing with powerful feelings. If a patient or partner wants help from a counselor, both can go. It can help couples to talk openly about the stress, anger, and grief that can come with cancer.

Communication:

Keep the lines of communication open.

People have different communication styles and needs to talk. Some men “clam up,” say little or nothing, and hide their feelings. They might feel that it does no good to talk about what they can't control. Or, they may think they should appear to be “strong.” Both the cancer patient and his partner, however, can cope better with cancer if they are willing to share thoughts and feelings.

Partners and patients can use these tips to keep communication open.

- Share your worries and fears. This may not “fix” anything. But worries and fears seem smaller when they're out in the open. There's a saying that “a shared worry is half the worry.” You may also help each other find ways to better handle fears.
- Understand that your partner needs to talk about her or his concerns. It's easy for all the attention to be focused on the patient. Sometimes partners don't want to “burden” patients with their own concerns. But, mutual sharing can help couples to feel closer. Neither of you needs to keep your thoughts or feelings a secret.
- Share opinions about medical decisions. Making decisions about treatment is hard. Sometimes your partner can share ideas or insights that help.
- Talk openly about problems with sex and intimacy. Feeling tired from cancer treatment may create a lack of interest in sex. And, hormone changes from the treatments can add to this. A partner may be going through their own fatigue and body changes as well. Work together to maintain closeness in your relationship.

Support:

Partners might need extra support along with the patient.

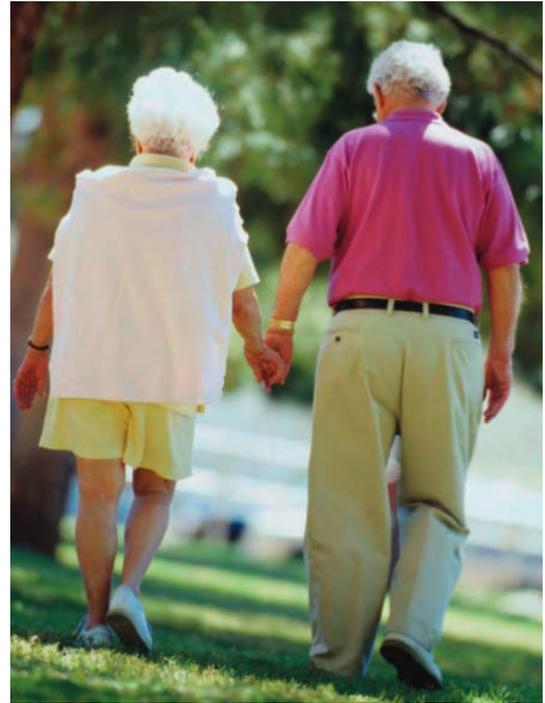
Most everyone expects that a patient with cancer needs support. But it's easy to forget that partners need support too. The partner's needs might be different from the patient's, but they are just as important.

Support for the Spouses/Partners

Each person can make a list of the most important things they need from the other. For example, the partner might want a hug each morning and before going to sleep at night. Ask each other what helps them to feel supported and do those things.

Try these tips to get the support you need:

- Encourage your partner to take personal time, to take breaks. Partners sometimes feel guilty if they take time away from the cancer patient. But, partners have their own needs and their own lives to live. They may want to spend time with personal friends, to exercise, to work, or to enjoy hobbies. Spending time away from the patient helps keep the partner healthy. This is best for everyone in the long run.
- Make a list of how family and friends can help. When they ask, have the list ready. Different people will be able to help in different ways, such as running errands, fixing a meal, helping with house cleaning or child care. Helpers will be glad to know how to help.
- Spend time with friends and family who are positive and hopeful. Limit time with others who are more negative.



When should patients and partners get help?

Ask your healthcare team for a referral to a counselor who helps couples deal with cancer when:

- The two of you as a couple are not able to work through differences
- One or both of you is using drugs or alcohol to cope, or withdrawing from family activities
- One of you feels so much despair that you think about hurting yourself or others
- You would like a professional to help you communicate and share feelings

Support for the Spouses/Partners

Some couples find that positive things happen when they face cancer together.

No one chooses to get cancer and no one asks to go through the hard times of cancer treatment or the side effects and symptoms after cancer treatment. Yet, many have found new closeness in their relationships and even new meaning in their lives. You and your partner may come to appreciate each other in ways that you never expected.



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

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