

Sexual Activity During Cancer Treatment

Information for Men

This information provides guidance for men on sexual activity during cancer treatment.

1. Use Birth Control to Prevent Pregnancy

If a woman becomes pregnant from sperm damaged by exposure to radiation, chemotherapy, or other anticancer medications, she is at risk of having a miscarriage or the fetus is at risk for having birth defects. If your partner is a female who could become pregnant, use birth control (contraception) throughout your cancer treatment. Do not rely on withdrawing before ejaculation (“pulling out”) or avoiding sex during fertile times of her menstrual cycle (the “rhythm method”). These are not effective in preventing pregnancy.

There are different types of birth control you can consider.

If you have only 1 female partner, ask her to see the healthcare provider (HCP) who manages her gynecologic care to help her select a method of birth control that is best for her. Examples include birth control pills, intrauterine devices (IUDs), and diaphragms.

If your partner chooses not to use birth control, or if you have more than 1 female partner, use a condom each time you have sex. Condoms not only prevent pregnancy, but they also protect you from sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.

If a condom breaks or falls off while you are having vaginal sex, your female partner may want to consider taking emergency contraception if she is not using another form of birth control. Emergency contraception includes levonorgestrel (Plan B®), also known as the “morning-after pill.”

After treatment ends, and if you are getting chemotherapy, other anticancer medication, or radiation directed to an area near your testes, continue to use birth control for at least 1 year after your treatment has ended. This allows time for damaged sperm to clear from your body. If you plan to have children after treatment, ask your doctor when it is safe for you to start trying.

Depending on your situation, your doctor may recommend you wait more or less time. Some treatments may affect your fertility (the ability to have a biologic child). If you have questions about this, ask your doctor or nurse.

2. Protect Yourself from Infection

If you or your partner have sex with multiple partners, you are at risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, if you do not use barrier protection. In addition, certain cancer treatments can cause low blood cell counts for long periods of time which may increase your risk of infection. Your doctor or nurse will tell you if this is a concern for you.

To prevent infection:

- Wash your hands and genitals before and after having vaginal, oral, or anal sex.
- To protect yourself from STIs (including HIV), consider using a condom each time you have vaginal, oral, or anal sex throughout your treatment.
- If you use sex toys, wash them with hot soapy water every time you use them.
- If you are expected to have very low blood cell counts for a long period of time, your doctor or nurse may advise you to use a barrier device during sex—condoms or dental dams.
- In some situations, you may even be advised to avoid sex that involves penetration or contact with mucous membranes while your blood counts are low. This includes vaginal, oral, and anal sex or inserting fingers, vibrators, or sex toys into your anus.
- Hugging, cuddling, gentle touching, and kissing skin are other ways you can be intimate with your partner during this time.
- Some men develop yeast infections under the foreskin of the penis during treatment, especially if they are taking steroids or antibiotics. Symptoms include itching, irritation, and discharge from the penis. If you suspect you have a yeast infection, avoid sex and call your doctor or nurse.

If you have had a transplant, you are at increased risk of infection for many months after your treatment. Until your doctor tells you that your immune system has recovered.

- Use a latex condom each time you have vaginal, oral, or anal sex.
- Use a barrier device (condoms or dental dams) any time your partner's saliva, vaginal secretions, or semen could enter your mouth.
- Do not perform any sexual activity that could expose your mouth to feces.

3. Avoid Exposing Your Partner to Chemotherapy and Other Anticancer Medications

We do not know how much anticancer medication gets into a man's semen or if this poses any risk to a sexual partner. If this is a concern for you or your partner, consider using a condom whenever your semen could enter your partner's vagina, mouth, or anus. This will prevent your partner, regardless of his or her age or sex, from being exposed to any medication that may be in your semen.

We don't know how long these medications may be in semen, but you could use a condom each day you have chemotherapy and for 1 week afterward.

Item: 56148
Revised: 09/2016

If your partner is pregnant during your treatment, consider using a condom each time you have vaginal sex. We don't know if the medications in your semen would pose any risk to the fetus, but scientific studies on animals suggest this is possible.

4. Barrier Devices

Use a condom for vaginal or anal sex and a dental dam when you are receiving oral sex.

Condoms

You can buy condoms at any drug store. We recommend latex condoms, but if you or your partner is allergic to latex, use polyurethane condoms. Spermicides do not provide any added protection. You can use lubricated condoms or use a separate water- or silicone-based lubricant.

Before you use a condom, check the expiration date on the wrapper. Expired condoms are more likely to break.

To use a condom correctly, follow these instructions:

- Be careful when opening and handling the condom. Do not use your teeth, scissors, or other sharp objects to open the wrapper. Do not use the condom if it is torn, brittle, or stiff.
- Wait until your penis becomes firm before putting on the condom.
- While pinching the tip of the condom, unroll it over your penis as far as it will go. The extra space at the tip is needed to collect your semen.
- Smooth out any air bubbles—they can cause the condom to break.
- After you have ejaculated, but before your penis becomes soft, hold the base of the condom (where the ring is) and carefully pull your penis out of your partner so that nothing spills.
- Carefully slide off the condom and throw it in the trash.

Dental dams

A dental dam is a thin, rectangular sheet of latex or silicone that covers the genitals of a woman receiving oral sex. You can buy these online or make one out of a condom.

- If you want to make a dental dam out of a condom, you may want to avoid those with a spermicide or lubricant, as the taste may be unpleasant. Cut off the tip and cut down the side of the tube to make a sheet.
- To use a dental dam, have your female partner hold the sheet over her vulva or anus while you are giving her oral sex.

If you have any additional questions, speak with your doctor or nurse. If you have any concerns about how to follow these suggestions based on your religious observances, we advise you to speak with your religious leader.