

The ROYAL MARSDEN

NHS Foundation Trust

Questions about sex and cancer for teenagers and young adults

Patient Information



NHS



**Teenage
and Young
Adults Team**

Introduction

Cancer can change many things, and this can include your sex life. Talking about sex can feel awkward and embarrassing, and when you've been treated for cancer, it can feel even more difficult.

So, can you talk to your medical care team? Well, we would like you to, and we understand that it can be difficult to bring the subject up. We all deserve to have happy sex lives, and an important part of your care is giving you the opportunity to talk about anything you may be worried about.



At The Royal Marsden we also have a Sexual Health Therapist. You can ask to see them via your clinical team, or you can refer yourself by contacting the Adult Psychological Support Service (you must be 16 years old or over). This is a safe space for you to talk about sex and relationships – you won't be examined or asked to take your clothes off. You may even choose to bring your partner along to a session.

FAQs

My hormones feel all over the place, is this normal?

Yes, and there can be a mixture of reasons why. Hormonal changes can affect how we are feeling emotionally along with how our body feels and responds. Please talk to us if this is something you are worried about.

How can I discuss this with my parents without them feeling too awkward?

Parents generally do find this hard, and it can seem harder when you've had cancer. But thinking about intimacy and sex can show that you are looking at the positives in life.

Remember that you are probably both feeling awkward and embarrassed. Once you start having a conversation, it can show that you are really thinking about your future and the things that are important to you. Showing them this leaflet can start as a useful starting point.

Is masturbation harmful?

No, it's generally the opposite. Connecting with your own body in a pleasurable way is good for your general wellbeing. We recommend using a water-based lubricant for any sort of sexual activity, including masturbation.

Can my partner talk to someone too?

Partners can often worry about putting pressure on you, or causing pain during or after cancer treatment. It can be helpful to talk these things through together. Try to find a time to talk when there isn't any pressure to do anything else. Put phones and devices down so that you can focus on each other. Our Sexual Health Therapist will often talk to partners too.

Is it normal to worry about sex?

Most people do. We get very mixed messages about sex, and it can be confusing at the best of times. Sex and intimacy can mean many different things to different people and you get to decide what it means to you.

Can I be sexually active whilst having treatment for cancer?

Yes, but you should ensure that you use barrier methods of contraception, such as condoms. This is to protect you from infection when you have a weakened immune system due to undergoing treatment. Females should also take oral contraception as chemotherapy or radiotherapy can cause miscarriage, premature delivery and birth defects during pregnancy. Please ensure you discuss with your treatment team which oral contraceptive is best to take, as some should not be taken with certain treatments.

I have been diagnosed with premature ovarian suppression due to my treatment – do I need to start HRT (hormone replacement therapy)?

Oestrogen replacement is important for bone and heart health, and you may need to have some form of replacement; but this will need to be discussed with your medical team depending on your underlying diagnosis and treatment. If you are on HRT this does not provide contraception so you will still need to ensure you are using a form of contraception.

What if I still find sex challenging once treatment ends?

Life doesn't necessarily return to normal as soon as treatment ends, and your sex life is no exception. It takes time for your body and mind to heal. The best thing to do is to be kind to yourself and discuss your concerns openly with someone you can confide in, like a partner/friend or family member. In time, you will be able to feel more comfortable and with that, your sex life will be more enjoyable too.

“ Don't let cancer make you feel abnormal. Your sexuality is still a part of you and your identity as a young person. Talk to people around you about it and don't bottle it up. ”

A TYA patient at The Royal Marsden

Further information and support

Trekstock

www.trekstock.com/sex-and-cancer

Sex with Cancer

www.sexwithcancer.com/

Macmillan

www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/stories-and-media/booklets/sex-and-relationships-support-for-young-people-affected-by-cancer

Contact details

Please contact your Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) if you would like to meet with the Sexual Health Therapist.

References

This booklet is evidence based wherever the appropriate evidence is available, and represents an accumulation of expert opinion and professional interpretation.

Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

The Royal Marsden Help Centre

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Sutton 020 8661 3759 / 3951

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Should you require information in an alternative format, please contact The Royal Marsden Help Centre.

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