

# Sexuality and Chemotherapy

Most patients can have sex during chemotherapy (chemo) treatment. However, there is a greater risk for infection if your white blood cell and platelet counts are low. If your counts are low or may become low, talk with your health care team to see if it is safe to have sex at that time.

## Changes in Sexuality

During chemo, some patients feel less interested in sexual intimacy. For some, fatigue can make sex difficult. Chemo may, but does not always, affect hormone levels. These changes may impact sexual organs and functioning.

### Men

During treatment, you may have trouble getting or maintaining an erection. This usually returns to normal after treatment.

Chemo may reduce your sperm cell count. This can affect your ability to father children. It does not affect your ability to have sex. A low sperm count may be temporary or permanent. It depends on the dose of chemo, the type of medicines and your age. Ask your doctor about the long-term effects of your treatment plan.

### Women

Chemo may affect how your ovaries work. Your periods may become irregular or stop completely. Changes can be temporary or permanent. Sometimes chemo may cause you to enter menopause. Common menopause symptoms include hot flashes and vaginal dryness or itching. Vaginal dryness can be relieved by using vaginal moisturizers. Use them often. Vaginal lubricants can make sexual activity more comfortable. You can buy these over-the-counter without a prescription.

Chemo causes vaginal mucositis in some patients. This is a painful irritation of the lining of the vagina. If you develop vaginal pain, tell your doctor.

Many factors affect a patient's ability to have children after treatment. These include the type and dose of chemo received. Age at the time of treatment is another factor. Ask your doctor about the long-term effects of your treatment plan.

## Changes in Fertility

Some treatments may lower sperm count, but this may not make a man infertile. Treatments may also cause a woman's periods to stop. However, you can still get pregnant before your periods return. Some chemo treatments may cause birth defects. Discuss your risks of pregnancy with your doctor. Talk with your health care team about the best method of birth control for you.

Always practice safe sex. Most birth control protects against pregnancy but only condoms protect you from infection. Latex condoms and dental dams help prevent infections from body fluids. If you use a lubricant with latex condoms, choose one that is water-based. **Do not** use a lubricant that has oil (such as baby oil or petroleum jelly). Oil weakens the condom.

## **For More Information**

MD Anderson has healthcare professionals who specialize in sexual health services. For more information or questions about sexual health services, ask for a referral to Gynecologic Oncology and Reproductive Medicine.