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Sexuality and well-being



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Coping with changes from prostate cancer and its treatment

There are different types of treatment available for men with prostate cancer.

The challenges and changes that accompany treatment can vary greatly from person to person. It is important to discuss treatment options and their implications carefully with your health care team.

This brochure can help you understand some of the effects that prostate cancer can have on your body, how you see yourself and your relationships with others.

Hormone therapy

The prostate gland is part of the male reproductive system. It produces fluid that forms part of the semen. The male hormones (androgens) that control how you have developed into an adult man can also cause prostate cancer cells to grow.

One of the ways prostate cancer is treated is to use medication to reduce the amount of the male hormone (mainly testosterone) or block its effect on cells (androgen deprivation therapy), which can cause a variety of changes in how you feel.

Common side effects of hormone treatment:

- **Hot flashes or flushes:** These occur because blood vessels are less stable. They can suddenly dilate (relax and get larger) and blood flows quickly into the veins, heating up the body and causing sweating.
- **Breast swelling:** All men have a little of the female hormone estrogen. When testosterone levels decrease, the estrogen takes over and may cause male breasts to swell and become tender.
- **Changes in weight, muscle and bones:** You may gain weight even as you lose muscle mass and bone strength. These changes may not reverse themselves after treatment ends. Increases in blood pressure, cholesterol, and onset of diabetes and heart disease may also occur.
- **Mood swings:** You may have sudden changes in mood as an effect from hormone therapy. Changes in body image and coping with other side effects can also lead to lowered self-esteem, anxiety and depression.
- **Lower sex drive:** Less testosterone means less desire for sex. Your penis may also not get hard (erect).

Helpful resources:

Sexuality and Cancer, booklet from the Canadian Cancer Society
www.cancer.ca
1-888-939-3333

Wellness Workshops

Wellness workshops are held at the Grand River Regional Cancer Centre and HopeSpring.

Register online, at the cancer centre registration desk or HopeSpring Cancer Support Centre.

Grand River Regional Cancer Centre
www.grhosp.on.ca/wellnessworkshops
519-749-4370 ext. 5497

Hope Spring
www.hopespring.ca
519-742-4673 or 1-888-680-4673

Prostate Cancer Information Service
Provided by Prostate Cancer Canada and Canadian Cancer Society
support@prostatecancer.ca
1-885-PCC-INFO

Contact:

If you have any questions or concerns,
please call the cancer centre at 519-749-4300 ext. 4380

Sources

This booklet has been compiled using information from the following sources:

Canadian Cancer Society
www.cancer.ca

National Cancer Institute
www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/PDQ/treatment/prostate

Michigan Cancer Consortium
www.prostatecancerdecision.org/helpaftertreatment.htm

It contains general information and is not meant to replace consultation with your health care team.

Bone health

Bone health is a concern for men in general as they get older. Testosterone reduction as a treatment for prostate cancer is only one of the risk factors for osteoporosis (bone loss). Aging, excessive alcohol intake, smoking, certain medications, family history, race (Caucasian or Asian) and/or vitamin and mineral deficiencies can all lead to thinning of the bones.

Your health care team will discuss supplementation of calcium and vitamin D (which aids in absorption of calcium) as recommended and monitor your bone mineral density. You can incorporate weight-bearing or resistance exercises into your fitness routine to maintain strength in your bones. Lower your chances of falling by wearing sturdy shoes. Look around your home to remove items that may be a tripping hazard and add supports where needed, especially in the bathroom.

Lack of energy

Fatigue is the most common side effect for both people living with cancer and those that care for them. It can be physical, mental or both. The disease and its treatments cause physical fatigue. With mental fatigue, feelings of worry and stress can tire you out.

How can I manage fatigue to feel better?

- Conserve your energy: plan your day, break up tasks into smaller parts. Listen to your body and take a break when you need one. Accept help when it is offered.
- Restore your energy: schedule time for fun. Do things that are relaxing or rejuvenating for you.
- Be active: regular exercise will boost your energy and lower stress.
- Plan time to rest: regular bedtime routines help you fall asleep and stay asleep. It's ok to nap but, set a limit, then do something active.
- Eat healthy, drink lots of water: try smaller, more frequent meals.
- Distract yourself: watch a light-hearted or funny movie; visit with family and friends.

Social work services at GRRCC

Counselling provides an opportunity to work through challenges as a result of the cancer experience in an empathetic, non-judgemental and individualized way. Thoughts, feelings and behaviours are explored to help with adjusting, functioning and improving well-being.

Tips to manage common side effects:

Hot flashes

- Cool off with water, a fan and light or layered clothing.
- Keep track of “trigger” foods or drinks. Alcohol, caffeine, cayenne peppers and hot drinks may trigger hot flashes.
- Try to manage stress. Feeling anxious or upset can make hot flashes worse. Find ways to relax that work for you.
- Talk to your doctor about medications that may help.

Breast swelling

- When testosterone falls and breasts enlarge, men may feel embarrassed. This swelling may also be painful. Soft fabrics and loose shirts may help. Applying a cold or warm pack, or using over the counter pain relievers may relieve breast tenderness.

Changes in weight, muscle and bones

- Work with your family doctor to monitor your health. The best way to control these side effects is to eat healthy and stay active.
- Be aware of how many calories your body needs and stick to the limit. For most men, about 2,000 to 2,500 calories per day is recommended. Your age, body size, exercise level and health conditions affect the amount of calories you need. Whole grains, fruits and vegetables and low fat protein should be the mainstay of your diet. Limit added fats, sugary snacks and processed foods (high in salt). Discuss appropriate supplementation of calcium and vitamin D with your health care team.
- Stay active. Try for at least 30 minutes of exercise, such as walking, every day. Vary your activities by breaking them into smaller amounts and alternating swimming, biking, gardening, dancing etc. Enjoy exercise with a friend to make it something to look forward to. An exercise program that has both aerobic (running, fast walking, swimming, biking, rowing) and resistance exercises (weight lifting) is best to try to increase muscle mass and decrease body fat. It will also make your bones stronger. Talk with your health care team before starting an exercise program.

Changes in mood

- You might not hear much about this because men sometimes think they shouldn't complain, show weakness or get upset. It's normal to feel sad, angry, anxious, hopeless or even grief-stricken at times.
- Prostate cancer treatments can be hard on a man's body and mind and can cause mood swings as a side effect.
- It can help if you talk with your partner, a close friend, someone who has prostate cancer, social workers or write in a journal or attend a support group. Sharing feelings may give you a better sense of control and help you adjust to your situation.
- Continue to do activities that give you a feeling of self-worth. Help others, care for your home and family, be involved in work or a community group. Talk to your health care team if you feel you need further help with your emotions.

General tips for coping with hormone changes:

- You don't have to suffer in silence. Share your feelings with your partner and your family. It can be helpful to talk to someone who has prostate cancer and may know how you are feeling. Consider joining a support group either in person or online. Social workers are available to help you work through any challenges you are facing. Speak to your health care team for a referral.
- Be gentle on yourself. These changes are not your fault. Hormone changes can cause sudden mood swings. Some prostate cancer treatments can cause fatigue and a lack of interest in sex. Open communication with loved ones can help them understand how you are feeling.
- Eat healthy and stay active. Common sense healthy habits will help you feel better and help you manage any physical side effects of treatment that you may be experiencing.
- Put effort into staying close and sexually active with your partner. Think about sexual changes as a chance to learn new ways to show affection.

Sexual side effects

Prostate cancer and its treatment often brings changes in a man's sex life, especially in sex drive and erections. It also will have an effect on fertility. Be sure to discuss with your health care team prior to treatment if you wish to father children. Even without prostate cancer, getting older and having health problems can cause changes. Prostate cancer and its treatment can increase them.

What changes are most likely to occur and why do they happen:

Changes in your sex drive (libido)

Feelings about having cancer and concerns about treatment side effects can lower your interest in sex. Cancer treatments such as surgery, radiation and medications can 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.
- After radiation treatment, erections may gradually decrease in firmness over many months.
- After hormone treatment, changes caused by the treatment may disappear in a few weeks to months, unless treatment lasted for a long time (several years).

Changes in orgasms

After prostate cancer treatment, men experience "dry orgasms". They still feel the pleasure of an orgasm, but little or no fluid (semen) is released. This is because the prostate gland is no longer making the fluid that mixes with the sperm. Feelings of sadness or loss are normal as some men miss having an ejaculation.

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

- Talk openly and honestly with your partner. Prostate cancer causes stress for both partners in a relationship. Partners need information; without it they may feel left out and unable to help. Attend medical appointments together; writing down questions prior to the visit helps you to remember them.
- Plan sexual activities for times when you are well-rested. Empty your bladder before sex. If you are worried about leaking urine, wear a condom.
- Be willing to try new ways to stay close and share intimacy. Many couples share sexual intimacy and pleasure without intercourse. Hugging, kissing, cuddling, holding hands can help you stay close. Be creative in ways that suit you and your partner.
- Talk to your health care team if you would like more support or a social work referral.
- Treatments for erection problems are available. Talk to your doctor about prescriptions and side effects. Most treatments for erectile dysfunction involve some changes and will require patience and understanding from your partner. Having support from your partner and keeping your expectations reasonable will help. A realistic goal is to have erections firm enough for intercourse.
 - Medications taken by mouth: these help you get an erection with sexual stimulation. They do not cause an erection all by themselves. They can help after radiation treatments and work best if surgery did not remove nerves or if there is a partial erection occurring.
 - Medication used in the penis (MUSE-medicated urethral system for erection): this is medication in pellet form inserted into the opening of the penis, or in liquid form injected into the base of the penis with tiny needles. These cause erections in several minutes which last 30 to 60 minutes.
 - Vacuum erection device (VED): this is a device used to bring blood into the penis to create an erection. A pump attached to a tube into which the penis is placed, creates a vacuum that draws blood into the penis which is maintained by placing a ring at the base of the penis.
 - Penile implants: this requires surgery in which a pair of cylinders are placed inside the penis. These are inflated with fluid to create an artificial erection.