

# Male Sexual Dysfunction

Survivors sometimes experience sexual dysfunction after cancer treatment. Knowing what some of the causes are and being able to describe your symptoms to your health care team can help you manage sexual dysfunction.

## Male Sexual Dysfunction: Detailed Information

This information is meant to be a general introduction to this topic. The purpose is to provide a starting point for you to become more informed about important matters that may be affecting your life as a survivor and to provide ideas about steps you can take to learn more. This information is not intended nor should it be interpreted as providing professional medical, legal and financial advice. You should consult a trained professional for more information. Please read the Suggestions (<http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Physical-Effects-of-Cancer/Male-Sexual-Dysfunction#s#s>) and Additional Resources (<http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Physical-Effects-of-Cancer/Male-Sexual-Dysfunction#a#a>) sections for questions to ask and for more resources.

Cancer and treatment can affect survivors in different ways. One area of life that might change is the ability to have or enjoy sex. These changes in men following cancer or treatment are sometimes referred to as male sexual dysfunction. Whether the cause is physical or emotional, there are often ways to treat and manage this condition.

If this happens to you, discuss treatment options with your health care team.

Some men feel uncomfortable discussing sexual concerns with a doctor or other members of the health care team. However, they can answer questions, refer you to a specialist if needed, and help you find solutions.

## What are some indicators that may cause concern?

The following may be indicators or signs that it is time to talk with your doctor about concerns related to sex after cancer treatment:

- Inability to get or keep a firm erection (erectile dysfunction or ED)
- Loss of desire for sex
- Difficulty reaching climax
- Having a dry orgasm or a climax without any semen
- Orgasms (climaxes) that don't feel as good as they did before cancer
- Pain in the penis or testicles during sex

These types of symptoms are not generally considered to be medical emergencies. For this reason, you may wonder if you should bring them up to a member of your health care team. Keep in mind that all of your physical and emotional concerns are important. This is especially true if you are experiencing pain during sex or feeling that your intimate relationship has become less enjoyable.

Prepare in advance to talk with your doctor. Write down any questions and concerns about your sexual health before your medical appointments. There may be a need to request extra time for your appointment to allow enough time for a discussion. Share this information with your doctor and ask for answers to your questions. If he or she cannot help you, ask for a referral to another health care professional who specializes in this area.

### **When are problems with sexual functioning likely to appear?**

Not all survivors will experience sexual problems. If they are going to happen, it is likely to occur during and after cancer treatment. Problems caused by radiation to the pelvis may develop months or even years after cancer treatment is done. Be certain to discuss any concerns with your doctor if you begin to notice any changes in your ability to have or enjoy sex. Because risk increases as men age, you may not notice sexual dysfunction until years after your treatment ends.

In some cases, a survivor may decide to wait for a while after treatment before having sex. Another man may be ready to begin having sex again right away. In any case, there may be things that can help you prepare emotionally as well as make the sexual experience more physically comfortable.

### **What causes sexual functioning concerns after cancer?**

There are many different causes for sexual functioning concerns in male cancer survivors. Some are physical causes. Others may be due to changes in how you feel about yourself, your body, or other aspects of your life.

Certain types of cancer, such as those that affect sexual organs, may put survivors at risk for problems. Men treated for prostate cancer have higher rates of dysfunction--up to 75 to 85 percent. Sexual problems are most common in men whose tumors were in the pelvic area. These include prostate cancer and cancers of the bladder, colon, or rectum.

Different types of sexual functioning concerns in male survivors can result from:

- A drop in testosterone levels (the hormone made in the testicles) during hormone therapy for prostate cancer
- Damage to areas of the brain by cancer or treatment
- Radiation to the pelvic area affecting the prostate, bladder, colon, groin or penis
- Surgery removing pelvic organs such as the prostate, seminal vesicles, areas of the colon or the penis
- High doses of chemotherapy may damage sexual desire or the ability to have erections
- Side effects of medicines to treat pain, nausea, depression or anxiety

Sexual functioning challenges can become more common in men as they get older. For example, about half of men without a cancer history will experience erection problems by age 70. This means that older male survivors may experience sexual functioning problems later in life that are not related to cancer or the treatment they received.

Other factors can also affect sexual functioning. For example, men are more likely to develop erectile dysfunction if they are overweight, smoke, or drink heavily. In addition, other health problems like heart disease, high blood pressure, or diabetes may also affect fertility.

The emotional effects of cancer may contribute to survivors feeling anxious, depressed, or self-conscious. This can also contribute to stress with a partner. In some cases, the result may be challenges with sexual functioning. Working with a licensed counselor to deal with these types of emotions is often very helpful.

The following table lists some of the possible causes of sexual dysfunction and issues that can be discussed with your health care team:

<b>Possible Physical Problems</b>	<b>Type of Cancer Treatment That May Affect Sexual Functioning</b>	<b>Possible Symptoms</b>
Low testosterone levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Removal of testicles</li><li>• Hormone therapy for prostate cancer</li><li>• Intensive chemotherapy</li><li>• Radiation near testicles</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Loss of desire for sex</li><li>• Trouble feeling excited during sex</li><li>• Erectile dysfunction</li><li>• Trouble reaching an orgasm</li></ul>
Damage to nerves near prostate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Radical prostatectomy</li><li>• Radical cystectomy</li><li>• Abdomino-perineal resection</li><li>• Damage to small blood vessels from pelvic radiation affects nerves</li><li>• Toxic side effect of chemotherapy</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Trouble getting and keeping erections</li></ul>
Damage to blood flow to the penis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Damage to blood vessels during pelvic surgery</li><li>• Scarring from pelvic radiation therapy</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Trouble getting and keeping erections</li></ul>
Damage to nerves controlling semen during orgasm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Removal of lymph nodes in men with testicular cancer</li><li>• Surgery on some parts of the colon</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Orgasm and fertility problems</li><li>• Orgasms may not feel the same as they did before cancer</li></ul>

Possible Physical Problems	Type of Cancer Treatment That May Affect Sexual Functioning	Possible Symptoms
Removal of prostate and seminal vesicles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Radical prostatectomy</li> <li>• Radical cystectomy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orgasm and fertility problems</li> <li>• Less sensation</li> </ul>
Removal of part or all of the penis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partial or total penectomy to treat cancer of the penis</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Erection, orgasms and ejaculation may continue to some extent</li> </ul>

### **Are there successful treatments for men with sexual concerns?**

There are a number of treatment options that can help men with sexual functioning concerns. It is important to discuss problems and concerns with your doctor as early as possible.

Your health care team can help you learn more about how to treat concerns and improve your ability to enjoy sex again. There are many ways to enhance and share pleasure and closeness with your partner. Even survivors who no longer have sex are able to find ways to continue to enjoy deep intimacy with their partners.

Of course, the most important factor in choosing a cancer treatment is its ability to control cancer. However, your sexual health is also important. If you are worried about sexual dysfunction after cancer treatment, talk with your health care team soon as you can about the different therapies that may be available to help you.

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### **Works Cited**

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## Male Sexual Dysfunction: Suggestions

The suggestions that follow are based on the information presented in the Detailed Information (<http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Physical-Effects-of-Cancer/Male-Sexual-Dysfunction#d#d>) document. They are meant to help you take what you learn and apply the information to your own needs. This information is not intended nor should it be interpreted as providing professional medical, legal and financial advice. You should consult a trained professional for more information. Please read the Additional Resources (<http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Physical-Effects-of-Cancer/Male-Sexual-Dysfunction#a#a>) section for links to more resources.

The following is a list of sexual functioning concerns and how to find help:

Sexual Functioning Concerns	How to Find Help
Loss of desire for sex after cancer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Have a member of your health care team check your medications for possible side effects.</li><li>• See a urologist or an endocrinologist to find out if your testosterone may be low. However, if you had prostate cancer, you cannot take testosterone safely. Discuss other options with your health care team.</li><li>• If there are no physical causes, see a licensed counselor to find out if problems could be related to feelings of depression, anxiety or a change in self-esteem.</li></ul>
Erection problems (erectile dysfunction or ED)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• See a urologist or family doctor who specializes in men's sexual problems. Some clinics specialize in treating erectile dysfunction.</li><li>• If you think your problem is caused by anxiety or stress and not physical damage from cancer treatment, you may want to talk with a licensed counselor.</li></ul>
Concerns about orgasm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask your health care team if this might be a side effect of your medicine.</li><li>• Discuss fertility concerns and treatment options with your doctor.</li><li>• Try not to put pressure on yourself to have an orgasm. This may make it hard for you to relax. Give yourself time.</li></ul>
Pain in the penis or testicles during sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consult a urologist if experiencing pain in the penis during erection. This may be a sign of inflammation or scarring,</li></ul>

<b>Sexual Functioning Concerns</b>	<b>How to Find Help</b>
	<p>especially if the penis curves when it is erect.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A sharp pain in the penis or testicles during climax can result from scar tissue after surgery or radiation therapy, chronic tension in muscles on the floor of the pelvis, or occasionally, an infection in the prostate. Consult a urologist.</li> </ul>

The following is a list of treatment options that may be available for erectile dysfunction along with some of the pros and cons for using them:

<b>Possible treatment for erectile dysfunction</b>	<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
Pills (PDE-5 Inhibitors)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy to use</li> <li>• Natural</li> <li>• Only minor side-effects</li> <li>• Safe for most men unless they have severe heart disease or use nitrates</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expensive</li> <li>• Do not work well for men who have severe ED</li> </ul>
Vacuum devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One-time purchase</li> <li>• Covered by insurance</li> <li>• Few side effects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using the pump interrupts intercourse</li> <li>• May not be comfortable</li> <li>• Requires practice to use correctly</li> <li>• Erection may not be firm enough</li> </ul>
Penile injections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very effective for most men</li> <li>• Can be used before starting sex</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expensive</li> <li>• Need to refrigerate medicine and use syringes</li> <li>• Must learn self-injection</li> <li>• May cause pain for some men</li> </ul>
Penile suppositories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A small pill that melts</li> <li>• Same medicine as injections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expensive</li> <li>• Does not work for all men</li> </ul>
Penile prostheses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very effective for most men</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involves surgery and pain during recovery</li> </ul>

Possible treatment for erectile dysfunction	Pros	Cons
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Becomes part of man's body</li> <li>• Inflatable types are not visible</li> <li>• Erection looks and feels natural</li> <li>• Covered by insurance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can only be repaired surgically</li> <li>• Erections are slightly shorter than before</li> <li>• Destroys natural erection reflex</li> <li>• Not a reversible treatment</li> </ul>
Herbs and vitamins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inexpensive</li> <li>• Easy to get</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not always work</li> <li>• May interfere with other medicines</li> <li>• May have unknown effects</li> </ul>

### Male Sexual Dysfunction: Additional Resources

#### LIVESTRONG Navigation Services

[LIVESTRONG.org/Get-Help](http://LIVESTRONG.org/Get-Help)

Online: Complete an intake form through the LIVESTRONG website.

Phone: 1.855.220.7777 (English and Spanish)

Navigators are available for calls Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Central Time).

Voicemail is available after hours.

LIVESTRONG offers assistance to anyone affected by cancer, including the person diagnosed, loved ones, caregivers and friends. The program provides information about fertility risks and preservation options, treatment choices, health literacy and matching to clinical trials. Emotional support services, peer-to-peer matching and assistance with financial, employment and insurance issues are also available. To provide these services, LIVESTRONG has partnered with several organizations including Imerman Angels, Navigate Cancer Foundation, Patient Advocate Foundation and EmergingMed.

#### American Cancer Society (ACS)

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

**Email:** Submit questions in English or Spanish from the “Contact Us” page.

**Phone:** 1-800-227-2345

TTY for deaf or hard of hearing callers: 1-866-228-4327

The American Cancer Society (ACS) offers information about many of the challenges of cancer and survivorship. You can search for information by cancer type or by topic. ACS provides a list of support groups in your area. You can join online groups and message boards. Some information on the website is available in Spanish, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese. ACS specialists can answer questions 24 hours a day by phone or email.

**U.S. Institutes of Health - National Cancer Institute (NCI)**

[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

The National Cancer Institute's website provides accurate information about the challenges cancer can bring. You can search for information by cancer type or topic. You can find information about treatment, financial and insurance matters. You can also learn how treatments in development work and search for a clinical trial in your area. This site also has a good dictionary of cancer terms, drug information and other publications. Cancer information specialists can answer your questions about cancer and help you with quitting smoking. They can also help you with using this Web site and can tell you about NCI's printed and electronic materials. The knowledgeable and caring specialists have access to comprehensive, accurate information on a range of cancer topics, including the most recent advances in cancer treatment. The service is confidential, and information specialists spend as much time as needed for thorough and personalized responses.

Online assistance is available in English or Spanish through the

**Online:** *LiveHelp* instant messaging system. This service is available Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. (EST)

**Email:** Send an email through the "Need Help?" section of the website

**Phone:** 1-800-422-6237  
TTY for deaf and hard of hearing callers: 1-800-332-8615

Information specialists answer calls Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. local time.

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