# Intimacy and sexuality for women with gynaecological cancer - starting a conversation

# If you need more information

There are a number of resources available that you and your partner can read. They might also help you think about other questions you would like to ask your treatment team.

### Cancer Council NSW – Sexuality, Intimacy and Cancer\*1

http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Sexuality-Intimacy-and-Cancer.pdf

Cancer Council Victoria – Sexuality and cancer\*2 http://www.cancervic.org.au/downloads/brochures/cancer\_types/Sexuality\_cancer\_08.pdf

Cancer Council Western Australia - Sexuality and Cancer CD set\* http://www.cancerwa.asn.au/resources/publications/patients/tracks/#cancersexuality

# **Ovarian Cancer Australia – Resilience**

http://www.ovariancancer.net.au/treatment-support/support-resources/resilience/

#### National Comprehensive Cancer Network – Intimacy and Sexual Issues for **Patients Undergoing Cancer Treatment**

http://www.nccn.com/component/content/article/61-symptoms/1517-intimacy-and-sexual-issues-in-cancer-patients.html

\*These resources can also be ordered from the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20

# Where do I go next? Where do I go for help?

If you don't feel comfortable talking to your treatment team at this time, or you want more information, **Cancer Council Helpline is a free, confidential** telephone information and support service on 13 11 20.

If you need further help, there are a number of health professionals who may be able to assist you further, in addition to your current treatment team. These include health professionals who may have a special interest in sexuality such as a GP, psychologist, nurse, social worker, sexual health counsellor or physiotherapist. You may also be referred to a specialist psychosexual service or women's health service in your area.



#### References

<sup>1</sup> Cancer Council New South Wales 2011. Sexuality, Intimacy and Cancer, A guide for people with cancer, their families and friends. Sydney: Cancer Council New South Wales. <sup>2</sup> Cancer Council Victoria 2010. Sexuality and cancer: for people with cancer, their family and friends. Melbourne: Cancer Council Victoria.

#### Acknowledgements

Sections of Sexuality, Intimacy and Cancer (2011) have been adapted with permission from Cancer Council NSW. Sections of Sexuality and cancer (2010) have been adapted with permission from Cancer Council Victoria

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This resource has been developed to support women (and their partners) in understanding and addressing issues of intimacy and sexuality following the diagnosis and treatment of gynaecological cancer. It aims to empower women so they can ask questions that they may otherwise avoid asking due to embarrassment or other concerns. It also includes suggestions of where to go for information and support about issues of intimacy and sexuality.

# Who is this resource for?

This resource is for all women, of any age, who have been diagnosed with gynaecological cancer whether single, with a partner, heterosexual or homosexual. It provides questions you and/or your partner may wish to ask health professionals on issues of sexuality and intimacy.

# What is intimacy and sexuality?

The terms intimacy and sexuality have many meanings. They may also mean different things to different people. Intimacy can be expressed in different ways: by talking and listening on a personal level, by sharing a special place or a meaningful experience, or through physical affection. Some people associate sexuality with sexual intercourse. For other people, sexuality means a range of things including who you are, how you feel about yourself, how you express yourself sexually and your sexual feelings for others.<sup>1</sup> Intimacy and sexuality for you and your partner are influenced by many factors apart from your cancer and treatment. These can include your cultural and religious beliefs, your age or life stage, sexual orientation, if you were in your relationship before you were diagnosed and the nature of that relationship.



Australian Government

**Cancer** Australia

This resource can be downloaded from the Cancer Australia website: www.canceraustralia.gov.au or ordered by telephone: 1800 624 973



# The gynaecological cancer journey

A woman at any stage of her life can be diagnosed with gynaecological cancer. Everyone is different, but it is common for the diagnosis, treatment and the effects of gynaecological cancer to have an impact on your intimacy, sexuality and how you feel about your body, your femininity, relationships and other roles in your life. These changes and the emotional impact of a cancer diagnosis can be experienced at different stages of your cancer journey, both during and beyond treatment.

# At diagnosis

In the months before your diagnosis was made, there may have been some symptoms that affected your intimacy and sexuality. You may also have had issues related to intimacy and sexuality before your diagnosis that were influenced by factors other than your cancer.

# During treatment

Treatments such as surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy and other treatments can cause physical changes to your body and changes to how you feel about yourself and others close to you.

# • After treatment

After finishing treatment, there are sometimes longer term effects of both the cancer itself and the treatments you have had.



### Talking to your treatment team

Talking about issues of intimacy and sexuality related to your cancer and how you do this is very personal. For many people this can be quite difficult.

This guide may be useful at different stages of your cancer journey. Some of these questions may be relevant to you right now. Some may be relevant to you at a later time. You can ask different questions when you need to. Some of these issues may be easily resolved but some questions may be more complex and might not be able to be dealt with immediately. In some of these situations you can ask to be referred to a team member with specific skills and knowledge in this area.

Here are some questions you and/or your partner might find helpful when talking to your treatment team about issues of intimacy and sexuality:<sup>1,2</sup>

## Effects of my treatment

- What physical changes am I likely to experience?
- What emotional changes am I likely to experience?
- How long might these last? What can be done to help with these?
- How will this treatment affect my sex life?
- Will this treatment affect me having sex?

### Relationships

- How do I talk to my partner about these issues?
- When and how do I tell a new partner about how the cancer has affected me and my body?
- I'm afraid my partner is no longer attracted to me. What can I do?
- I'm afraid I can't satisfy my partner any more or my partner is no longer interested in sex. What can I do?
- Could my treatment affect my partner in any way?



#### Sexual desire and function

- Could having sex make my cancer worse or make it come back?
- Are there times when sex should be avoided or should I take any precautions?
- I don't feel sexually attractive at the moment. How can I overcome this?
- When will I be able to have vaginal intercourse or sex again?
- Am I likely to have any problems when I start having sex again?
- Are there other ways to experience intimacy and sexual pleasure?
- When am I able to consider engaging in other forms of sexual pleasure?
- I don't seem to feel the same about sex. Will this change?
- Sex doesn't feel the same any more. Is this normal?
- O It hurts when I have sex. What can be done about it?
- I am having trouble reaching orgasm. Will it always be like this?

#### Fertility and contraception

0	How will this treatment affect my fertility and
	ability to have children?

- O Can my fertility be preserved?
- Should I still use contraception?
  What kind is best for me?
- Will my periods stop? If so will they return?
- When can I start to try to get pregnant?

#### Hormones and menopause

- How will treatment affect my hormones?
  How long might the effects last?
  What can be done?
- Will my treatment cause early menopause?
- What therapies can help with menopausal symptoms?

#### Your notes



### For partners

- What can I do as a partner to support and enhance intimacy and sexuality within the relationship?
- Will having sex make my partner's cancer worse, or make it come back?
- Will having sex hurt my partner?
- Should I be concerned about my partner's cancer affecting me?
- If my partner is receiving chemotherapy, can I be harmed if we have sex?
- If my partner is receiving radiotherapy, will I be radioactive?

### For women whose cancer has progressed

issues of intimacy and sexuality may still be important. For example, you may want to ask:

- How can I talk to my partner about intimacy and sexuality at this stage of my cancer journey?
- How can I find personal space for sexual intimacy?