

## Sexual activity during systemic therapy

Many people have questions about sexual activity while they are on systemic therapy. **Systemic therapy** is the treatment of cancer using medications, including chemotherapy (intravenous or oral), antibody therapy, and hormones. This handout addresses any safety measures required while on each type of systemic treatment.

Sexual activity can include sex with penetration (vaginal or anal), oral sex, masturbation or manual stimulation, or use of sex toys. **The sexual activities described may not apply to you.** Ask your doctor or nurse if you have sexual preferences not included here, or any other questions. Intimate touch such as hugging is always considered safe.

Chemotherapy can cause **fertility** changes in both men and women. If you plan to have children in the future or think you might want to, tell your cancer care team as soon as possible. It is still **important** that birth control measures be used when receiving systemic therapy if you or your partner are of child-bearing age. This is because systemic therapy can cause harm to a developing fetus.

### Chemotherapy- Intravenous (IV) or oral (as a pill)

(for example: *Cyclophosphamide, Capecitabine*)

- Most forms of sexual activity while on chemotherapy are considered safe. However, there may be a small amount of chemotherapy in your body fluids (including vaginal secretions and semen) for up to 7 days. For this reason, we recommend the following:
  - During sex with penetration (vaginal or anal), wear a condom for 7 days after your last day of chemotherapy.
  - During oral sex, wear a condom or dental dam for 7 days after your last day of chemotherapy. Avoid swallowing vaginal secretions or semen.
  - Kissing (even “french kissing”) is considered safe. The amount of chemotherapy exchanged in your saliva is very small.
- Most sources recommend you avoid receiving anal sex when your **white blood cells** may be low. Inserting a body part or object into your rectum can be a risk factor for infection. Your white blood cells may be low at any time during treatment. Talk to your doctor if you have specific questions about your white blood cell count.
- Some types of chemotherapy can cause **burning** or **redness** in your mouth, vagina or anus. This is called mucositis. If you have mucositis, avoid sexual activity that causes discomfort or pain.
- You may be at a higher risk for **bleeding** or **bruising** while on chemotherapy. Avoid sexual activity that can cause injury, bleeding or bruising.
- Practice **good personal hygiene** (soap and warm water). This is especially important while on chemotherapy. Body parts, such as hands or mouth, or objects, such as sex toys, should be cleaned thoroughly after sex. For women, avoid touching the vagina with anything that has been used near the anus.



## Antibody/biological therapy (for example: Rituximab)

- Sexual activity while on antibody/biological therapy is considered safe. Any amount of antibody/biological therapy in your body fluids is **not harmful**. Therefore you do not need to wear a condom or other form of protection (**for this reason**) during sex with penetration or oral sex. However, using condoms is always recommended as a safe sex practice with new or multiple partners or as a birth control measure if you are of a child-bearing age.

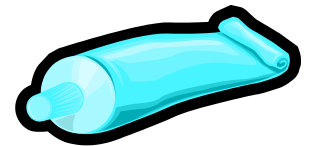
## Targeted Therapy (for example: Imatinib, Sunitinib, Gefitinib)

- These medications are often taken every day for a long period of time. Speak with your cancer care team about the risk of these drugs being present in body fluids. Recommendations can vary depending on the type of drug.

## Hormone therapy (for example: Tamoxifen, Anastrozole, Leuprolide, Abiraterone)

### Women

- Sexual activity while on hormone therapy is considered safe.
- Hormone therapy for women may cause sexual side effects such as loss of interest in sex (lowered libido) or vaginal dryness. These side effects often cause distress for women and their partners. Talk with your nurse or doctor if you experience these side effects.
- **Vaginal dryness** can be managed with the following:
  - A combination of a vaginal **moisturizer** and a **lubricant**. Try using moisturizers 2 or 3 times a week to help keep your vagina moist on a regular basis. A recommended moisturizer is **Replens<sup>®</sup>**.
  - Try using water-based lubricants, like **Astroglide<sup>®</sup>** or **Liquid silk<sup>®</sup>**, before and during sexual activity.
  - Allow more time for lubrication during foreplay. Sexual activity can be painful when there is not enough vaginal lubrication.
  - Vaginal estrogen (a cream) may be an option to help with vaginal dryness. Talk to your cancer doctor about whether vaginal estrogen is an option for you.



### Men

- Sexual activity while on hormone therapy is considered safe.
- Hormone therapy for men may cause sexual side effects such as loss of interest in sex (lowered libido), problems with getting or keeping an erection, being unable to reach orgasm, and growth of breast tissue. These side effects often cause distress for men and their partners. Talk with your nurse or doctor if you experience these side effects.

## General concerns

- **Herpes infections** can flare up when cancer treatment lowers your immune system. Talk to your doctor if you have been diagnosed with herpes before.
- For women, **yeast infections** may be more likely to occur while on systemic therapy. Yeast infections can lead to other issues, including pain during sexual activity. Talk to your doctor right away if you think you have a yeast infection.

**Sexual concerns, including issues with sexual functioning, infertility, body image and relationships, often happen for men and women going through cancer treatment. Talk to your doctor, nurse or a social worker about your concerns.**