

**MACMILLAN**  
CANCER SUPPORT

# SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS

Support for young people affected by cancer



# About this booklet

This booklet is about cancer, sex and relationships. It is for teenagers and young people who are having or have had cancer treatment. It may also help carers, family members and friends.

The booklet explains how cancer and cancer treatment may affect your relationships and sex life. It also gives information about coping with any changes and how to get more support.

This information is for you

- whether or not you are in a relationship
- whether or not you are having sex
- whatever your sexual orientation or gender.

We hope it helps you deal with some of the questions or feelings you may have.

This booklet does not have detailed information about fertility. We have another booklet about this called **Fertility – support for young people affected by cancer** (see page 60).

## For more information

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm, or visit **macmillan.org.uk**

If you would prefer to speak to us in another language, interpreters are available. Please tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

If you are deaf or hard of hearing, call us using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app.

We have some information in different languages and formats, including audio, eBooks, easy read, Braille, large print and translations. To order these visit **macmillan.org.uk/otherformats** or call **0808 808 00 00**.

## How to use this booklet

The booklet is split into sections to help you find what you need. You don't have to read it from start to finish. You can use the contents list on page 3 to help you.

It is fine to skip parts of the booklet. You can always come back to them when you feel ready.

We have included quotes from young people who have chosen to share their story with us. Some names have been changed. To share your experience, visit **macmillan.org.uk/shareyourstory**

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# CANCER, SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS

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# How cancer can affect sex and relationships

Most people have questions about relationships and sex at some point during or after cancer treatment. You may have questions because cancer can:

- change your body
- affect your confidence
- change how you feel about sex
- make you worry about what people think about you.

These things are personal and can be difficult to talk about. You may also have a lot of other changes to cope with and think about. Cancer can affect many areas of your life, such as work, study or where you live. When these things change, your social life and relationships may have to change too.

It is important to get all the information and support you need. If you want to talk to someone but you are not sure where to start, you might find it helpful to read our information about talking about sex and relationships on pages 44 to 49 and who can help on pages 54 to 57.

# If you are in a relationship

If you are in a relationship, cancer can make things complicated. Some couples find their relationship grows stronger, while others find it hard to make it work. Every relationship is different.

## Making time for each other

Cancer can take up a lot of your time. You may have a lot of appointments and hospital visits. You may have to stay in hospital or travel far to have treatment. This can mean spending less time with your partner than you are used to. You may not be able to do as many things together if you are in hospital or recovering from treatment.

Try to make the most of the times that you are together. This may be time together as a couple with friends and family. Or it may mean deciding to spend some time together without other people.

Try not to worry about spending some time apart. It can help build a healthy and strong relationship. If there is no way to see each other face to face, try to keep in touch using video calls, texting or social media.

## Changes in your relationship

After a cancer diagnosis, it can sometimes feel like your partner or other people close to you do not feel as close. There may be lots of reasons for this:

- Lots of people do not know much about cancer or cancer treatment. They may not understand what you are going through or how you feel.
- Some people find it hard to cope with feeling upset or scared. They may avoid talking about what is happening, or even avoid spending time with you.
- If you have to stop working or studying during cancer treatment, you may feel you have less in common with your partner.
- Your relationship might change because your parents or other people are suddenly more involved in your life.
- Your partner may not know how they fit into your life and what their role is.

Feeling close and comfortable in your relationship is important. But your feelings may change over time. Whatever you are feeling, keep talking and listening to each other. You could start by telling each other about your day or how you are both feeling.

## What about sex?

If you have sex, you may find you are less interested during cancer treatment. Side effects can sometimes make having sex physically difficult. Or you may just feel too tired or not relaxed enough.

Even without cancer, people can find their interest in sex changes over time for lots of reasons. This is common and it is not usually a problem.

It is helpful to talk with your partner about how you both feel and what you are thinking. Try to be clear and open about what you want. Remember, there should never be any pressure to have sex. Some people enjoy sex and want to keep their sex life as normal as possible during cancer treatment. It is not like that for everyone. Do whatever is right for you.

If you do have sex, make sure you use the right contraception. Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse can explain more about types of contraception that protect you and your partner, and that prevent pregnancy. You can find out more in our information about having cancer treatment on pages 20 to 23.

We have more information about coping with sexual problems caused by cancer in our booklet **Cancer and your sex life** (see page 60). Your healthcare team can help too.

'I remained positive so that my family and friends weren't badly affected by the news. My girlfriend was upset but tried her best to remain positive.'

**Steve**

## If a relationship ends

Sometimes relationships do not last. Going through a break-up can be hard for anyone. But it may seem even harder when you are coping with cancer too. However the relationship ends, it is normal to feel some strong emotions.

Things will get better with time. Until then, these tips might help:

- It is okay to be sad, angry or even relieved that the relationship is over. Give yourself time and be honest about what you are feeling.
- Try to do things you enjoy and that make you feel good about yourself.
- Do something that interests you, like a hobby. Or try something new.
- Spend some time with friends.

'During my diagnosis and treatment my friends were really supportive. I did split from my boyfriend during the difficult time prior to my diagnosis, but we are still friends.'

**Chloe**



## If you are not in a relationship

You do not need to be in a relationship to have questions about how cancer can affect your sex life or relationships. But you may worry that people will not expect you to think about it because you are single. Your healthcare team are there to answer any questions you have. Try not to be embarrassed, and ask them about anything you are worried about. Your healthcare team will be used to talking about these things.

## If you are not sure about your gender or sexuality

Finding out who you are, and what you like sexually, is part of life. Cancer does not change that. Some people have a clear sense of their gender and who they find attractive. Others need time to work it out.

It is common to have questions about gender or sexuality, but this can also be stressful. You may feel like it is another worry when you are already coping with a lot. You may worry about how people will react if you tell them you are not sure about these things.

If you find it hard to talk to people you know, some organisations offer support about gender and sexuality (see pages 65 to 66).

## What about sex?

It is natural to worry about what sex will be like after cancer treatment. It does not matter whether you have had sex before or not. Cancer and its treatment can make your body look, feel or work differently. This can be hard to deal with. Some changes may be short term, such as hair loss. But some may be permanent, for example losing a limb (amputation).

It can take a while to adjust to any changes to your body. If your appearance has changed, you may wonder if other people find you attractive. If your feelings or confidence are stopping you having sex, it can help to talk about it. Sometimes practical advice about coping with a change can help. You may choose to talk to:

- a friend or family member you trust (see pages 44 to 46)
- someone from your healthcare team, such as your cancer doctor, specialist nurse or GP (see pages 48 to 49)
- an organisation that can provide advice and support (see pages 54 to 57).

Most people can have sex after cancer treatment, but for some people sex is more complicated. We have more information about coping with sexual problems caused by cancer on pages 25 to 33.

## If you are starting a new relationship

Starting a new relationship can be exciting, but sometimes a bit scary too. It can be fun getting to know someone and letting them get to know you. But you might find it hard to know how to talk about cancer.

If you are still having cancer treatment, a new partner may not understand what you are going through. If you meet someone after you have finished cancer treatment, they may not even know you had cancer. You might not want to talk about it or feel it is too soon to tell them. If the cancer has affected your body, sex life or fertility, you may be worried about how a new partner will react.

It is your decision how, when and what you tell a new partner. Some people are comfortable talking about their experiences from the start of a relationship. Others prefer to wait. It can help to talk to someone else before deciding what to do. You might choose to talk to a family member, friend or health professional. We have more information about talking about sex and relationships on pages 44 to 49 that may help. Or you could contact an organisation for support (see pages 64 to 66).

If you decide it is the right time to talk to your partner, think about what you want them to understand. For example, what are the most important things for you? Or what are the things that worry you?

Relationships are often made stronger by good communication and honesty. Here are some tips:

- Think about how much you want to share. You may only want to tell your partner the type of cancer or some things about your treatment.
- Introduce the subject gently. You could start with something like, 'This is going to be hard, but I need to tell you something'.
- Try to give small amounts of information. Your partner may not be able to take everything in at one time.
- When you start talking, remember to listen too. Your partner might have different questions or worries that they want to talk about.



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## Talking to your healthcare team

When you are diagnosed with cancer, it can feel like everything happens very quickly. Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse may give you lots of information about cancer and treatments. You may have decisions to make.

It is important to get all the facts and support you need to make these decisions. This may include getting information about fertility and sex. You should also take time to think about what you want to do.

'I had my sperm frozen, which is something you'd never think about as a young guy. I had no idea whether I might want kids.'

**Arjun**

# Cancer and fertility

Cancer and cancer treatments can affect your fertility (your ability to have children). Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse will talk to you about this before your treatment starts. They may offer you the chance to collect your eggs or sperm before you start cancer treatment. This is called fertility preservation. If you lose your fertility, you may be able to use the stored eggs or sperm to start a pregnancy.

You do not have to be in a relationship or know whether you want to be a parent to have fertility preservation. It just gives you options in the future. Your fertility may be something you have not thought about much before. You may come to terms with the situation quickly and feel that dealing with the cancer is more important. Or you may find you do not process what has happened until the treatment has finished.

We have more information in our booklet **Fertility – support for young people affected by cancer** (see page 60).

'My consultant talked to me about fertility and freezing my eggs. Just to be safe I went to the fertility clinic and ended up freezing 23 eggs.'

Esther

# Having sex during treatment

If you have sex during cancer treatment, it is important to prevent a pregnancy and protect yourself and any partners.

## Preventing pregnancy

Some cancer treatments can be harmful to an unborn baby. During treatment and for a time after, it is important to use contraception if you or a partner could become pregnant. Even if your cancer treatment is likely to damage your fertility, you may still be able to start a pregnancy. Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse can tell you more about this.

There are lots of different types of contraception. Ask your cancer doctor or specialist nurse which type is best for you to use. This will depend on you and the type of cancer treatment you are having. Condoms or caps (diaphragms) can be used whatever type of cancer treatment you have.

Some hormonal contraceptives (such as the pill, patch, injection or implants) may not work during cancer treatment. This can be because of:

- the drugs you are taking
- side effects, such as diarrhoea and vomiting.

Your doctor or nurse can tell you more about which types of contraception are safe for you to use.

## Protecting partners

Small amounts of chemotherapy, or other drugs, can get into your body fluids. This includes fluid made in the vagina and the fluid that contains sperm. To protect any partners, your cancer doctor may advise that for a few days after taking certain drugs you:

- use a condom for vaginal or anal sex
- use a condom or a latex barrier such as a dental dam for oral sex.

Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse can give you more information about your treatment. If you use a lubricant, only use a silicon-based or water-based product with condoms or dental dams.

## Protecting yourself

Using condoms and dental dams also helps protect you from sexually transmitted infections (STIs). This is especially important if your cancer treatment affects how your body fights infections. Again, if you use a lubricant, only use a silicon-based or water-based product with condoms or dental dams.

You should also do the following:

- Avoid giving oral sex if you have cuts or sores in your mouth. There is a risk these could become infected.
- Tell your doctor if you notice any bleeding after sex. If the bleeding does not stop, contact a hospital straight away.
- Use a condom and some silicon-based or water-based lubricant if you give or receive anal sex. This helps prevent bleeding or infection.
- Never use the same condom for anal then vaginal or oral sex.
- Clean sex toys, dildos or other objects before you use them, or cover them with a condom. If you use one for anal sex, clean it or change the condom before you use it for vaginal sex. If a partner uses it too, clean it or change the condom before you use it again.

## Lubricants

Lubricants are gels or liquids that you can use before or during sex. Using lubricant can make penetration or sexual touching feel good. It can also make it feel easier and more comfortable.

Lubricants can be oil, silicon or water based. Always check the instructions to find out what type you are using. You should only use a silicon-based or water-based lubricant with a condom, dental dam, latex cap (diaphragm) and latex sex toys. Oil-based lubricant can make condoms, dental dams and latex caps tear and stop them working.

There are many brands of lubricant. Some products are available on the NHS. You can also buy lubricants from a pharmacy or other shops, or online.

# Stopping periods (menstruation)

Some cancer treatments can affect the cells in the blood. This means that sometimes during or after treatment you may have:

- a low level of red blood cells – these carry oxygen from the lungs to all the cells in the body
- a low level of platelets – these help blood to clot and stop bleeding and bruising.

Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse may talk to you about taking tablets or injections to stop your monthly periods (menstruation). This stops you losing blood while your blood cell levels are recovering.

After your treatment and when your blood cell levels are better, you stop taking the tablets or injections. Your periods usually start again slowly.

# Sex and the side effects of cancer treatment

Most people have some side effects during cancer treatment. Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse will explain what to expect. Some side effects can change:

- how you feel about your body
- how you feel about sex
- how you think other people feel about your body
- how your body works during sex.

Side effects often get better after treatment. But some people find they have sexual problems for a longer time after treatment ends. If you find a side effect hard to cope with, try not to ignore it. You may feel embarrassed talking about it, but your healthcare team can help.

Not everyone will have the side effects we mention here. You may have side effects or questions we do not cover. You can always talk to your cancer doctor or specialist nurse about them (see pages 48 to 49). Or you can call us on **0808 808 00 00**. You may also find it helpful to read our information about the type of cancer you have (see page 60).



## Tiredness (fatigue)

During and after treatment, you might have less energy, need more rest or get tired more easily. When you are tired, you may be less interested in sex or even in spending time with other people.

If you are with a partner, it might help to just spend time being close and intimate without planning to have sex. Sometimes this can lead to sex. But it is also a way to build trust and confidence together.

If you want to have sex or masturbate, choose a comfortable, relaxed position. You may want to plan for a time of day when you have more energy. Do not put pressure on yourself to make it last a long time or to orgasm (come).

We have more information in our booklet **Coping with fatigue (tiredness)** that you might find helpful (see page 60).

## Feeling sick

Some cancer treatments are more likely to cause sickness and nausea. This includes chemotherapy and some types of radiotherapy (see page 28). Your cancer team will give you drugs to prevent sickness. Tell your doctor or nurse if you still feel sick, so they can help.

Your treatment may only make you feel sick at certain times. For example, chemotherapy is most likely to make you feel sick in the hours or days after you have it. If you can work out a pattern, plan for times you are likely to feel more interested in sex.

We have more information about coping with sickness in our booklet **Side effects of cancer treatment** that you may find helpful (see page 60).

## Pain

Any type of pain can make you feel less interested in sex. You might not want to have sex because you feel uncomfortable. Or you might be worried that sex or masturbation will be painful.

It can help to experiment. You may want to do this with a partner or by yourself first. Find out which positions or type of touching feels comfortable for you.

If you have a partner, it can help to talk about how you are feeling. They may not want to have sex if they are worried about hurting you. Try to find a position that feels comfortable and relaxed for you both.

You can also ask your cancer team or GP for advice about painkillers and ways to reduce the pain.

## Problems with erections

Sometimes cancer treatment can cause problems with getting or keeping an erection. This is often a common response to what you are going through. It may happen because you are feeling tired or sick. Or it can happen because you are worried or coping with difficult feelings. It is often temporary and usually goes back to normal after treatment ends.

Some cancer treatments may also cause physical changes that make it difficult to get an erection. Your cancer doctor will explain if this is likely with your treatment. These changes include:

- low levels of the hormone needed for erections (testosterone)
- damage to the nerves or blood supply needed for erections.

## Low testosterone

Some cancer treatments can affect your testosterone hormone levels. Hormones are chemicals in the body that help control how the body works. Low testosterone levels mean you are less likely to have erections or be interested in sex. If your testosterone level is low for a long time, this can also cause thinning of the bones (osteoporosis), tiredness and a low mood.

If your testosterone levels do not recover, you can take testosterone replacement therapy (TRT). You usually take this as a gel on your skin or as an injection. TRT can improve sex drive, erections, mood and tiredness. It also helps prevent long-term problems, such as thinning of the bones.

## Damage to the nerves and blood supply

Sometimes cancer, or cancer treatment to the pelvic area, can damage the nerves and blood supply to the penis and testicles. The pelvic area is the area between the hips and below the belly button. Damage to this area can cause problems with getting an erection or how you ejaculate.

There are treatments that may help if you are having erection problems. The treatment you can have will depend on exactly what is causing the problem. It is always best to ask your healthcare team for expert advice.

We have more information about coping with sexual problems on our website.

## Early menopause

Some cancer treatments can affect female hormone levels. Your cancer doctor will explain if your treatment is likely to do this. Female hormones help control periods, fertility (being able to get pregnant and give birth) and how your body works during sex.

These hormone levels change naturally during the menopause (this usually happens between your mid-40s and mid-50s). When this happens, your periods slowly stop and you cannot get pregnant any more. You may also have symptoms such as:

- hot flushes and sweats
- vaginal dryness
- loss of interest in sex
- difficulty sleeping
- weight gain
- mood swings or loss of confidence.

If cancer treatment affects your hormone levels, you might have some of these symptoms. They may improve as your hormone levels recover after treatment.

If your hormone levels do not recover, you will have an early menopause. This is also called premature ovarian insufficiency (POI). You will not be able to get pregnant and you may keep having menopausal symptoms. Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse can talk to you about treatments that can help with these symptoms. They may also talk to you about treatment to replace the hormones that are at a low level. This also helps prevent long-term problems such as thinning of the bones (osteoporosis) or heart disease.

It can be hard to cope with this when you are already coping with cancer. As well as coping with the symptoms, you may be dealing with some difficult feelings about losing your fertility.

If you want to talk, you can call the Macmillan Support Line on **0808 808 00 00**. There are also organisations that give advice and support about early menopause (see pages 64 to 66).

## Vaginal dryness

During sex, the vagina usually produces some natural fluid. Without this, sex may feel uncomfortable or painful. Vaginal dryness can happen during cancer treatment because you are tired, stressed or less interested in sex. It may also happen if your treatment has caused menopausal symptoms.

If you want to have sex, a lubricant may help with dryness. It can help make sex more comfortable. Lubricant is a gel or liquid that you can use inside the vagina (see page 23). Your GP or cancer team can prescribe these products. You can also buy lubricants and moisturisers from a pharmacy or other shop, or online.

## Vaginal changes

Cancer of the cervix or vagina may be treated with surgery or radiotherapy. Sometimes these treatments cause scarring or nerve damage. They can also make the vagina narrower and less stretchy. If this happens, you might find sex less comfortable, or find it harder to orgasm (come).

There are treatments that may help if you are having sexual problems, but it can depend on what is causing the problem. It is best to ask your healthcare team for advice if you are worried about any vaginal changes.

We have more information about coping with sexual problems on our website. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/relationships/treatment-effects-sexuality-women](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/relationships/treatment-effects-sexuality-women)



# AFTER CANCER TREATMENT

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Life after treatment

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# Life after treatment

Although you may feel ready to get on with life after treatment, it is also common to have mixed feelings. Our booklet **Life after cancer treatment** may help (see page 60).

You may have days when you feel worried or less positive about the future. It can take time to recover physically and emotionally. You have been through a lot, so it is completely normal to feel this way.

## If your body is different

Cancer and cancer treatment can change your appearance or how you feel about your body. These changes can be short-term or long-term. Some changes are more obvious, such as scars or weight changes. Others cannot be seen but can have a big effect on you, such as changes to fertility or reduced sex drive.

If you find it hard to cope with changes to your body, give yourself time and be kind to yourself. You may find it gets easier. But if something about your appearance or body is stopping you having relationships or sex, you may want more advice and support (see pages 56 to 57).

Building your confidence can have a positive effect. Try to think of things that make you feel good about yourself. Set yourself goals that you know you can meet. You can work towards bigger goals by breaking them into smaller steps. For example, if you are worried about going out in public, you could start by having some close friends round to watch a film. If you feel comfortable with that, next time you could do something at someone else's house. Eventually, you might feel confident enough to go out somewhere quiet for a short time with friends.

We have more information about coping with body changes in our booklet **Body image and cancer** (see page 60).

'Losing my hair, eyebrows and eyelashes was painful. My confidence was low, but with friends, family and my boyfriend giving me boosts I slowly am working on building it up again.'

**Rosie**

## If sex is difficult

Physical and emotional changes after cancer treatment can affect your confidence or your ability to have sex. This could affect your relationship, or make you worried about starting a new relationship. Some changes can be long-term. Some changes only happen months or years after treatment.

If you find sex is difficult or painful, it is important to get the right support and information. There are often ways to improve your sex life. It can be embarrassing to talk about it, but your healthcare team understand the issues and can help you.

You can find out more about coping with sexual problems on our website. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/relationships/your-sex-life-and-sexuality](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/relationships/your-sex-life-and-sexuality)

## What about starting a family?

If your fertility is affected after cancer treatment, you may be able to have treatment to help you start a family.

Our booklet **Fertility – support for young people affected by cancer** explains more about this (see page 60).

The right time to try for a baby depends on when you finished treatment and the type of cancer and treatment you had. Your cancer doctor can give you advice.

Your doctor may advise that you wait for a time before trying for a baby. This gives your body time to recover.

'I was told I needed to have fertility treatment the minute after I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I now have 15 eggs stored and ready for when, or if, I need them.'

**Jane**

## For women

Some types of cancer treatment can cause the menopause to happen earlier than usual. If you have been told this is likely, ask your doctor for advice about pregnancy as soon as you can. They may advise you to try for a baby sooner to give you the best chance of getting pregnant.

Cancer treatment sometimes makes pregnancy more complicated. You may need extra support from your healthcare team during pregnancy if you have had:

- surgery or radiotherapy to the pelvic area (the area between the hips and below the belly button)
- cancer treatment that has affected the heart or kidneys.

It is important that you tell your healthcare team about your cancer treatment, even if it was many years ago. This is so they can give you the right care during pregnancy.

## Contraception

Even if there is a risk that cancer treatment has affected your fertility, you and a partner may still be able to get pregnant. If you are not ready to start a family, use contraception. We have more information about safe sex and cancer treatment on pages 20 to 23.





# GETTING SUPPORT

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# Talking about sex and relationships

Some people find it easy to talk about sex and relationships. Others feel embarrassed just thinking about it. It may not be easy, but talking about a problem can be the first step towards sorting it out.

Try to find someone you trust and feel comfortable talking to. This could be a partner, family member, friend or healthcare professional. You could talk face to face or on the phone. Or you may find it easier to send an email, letter or text.

It might help to think about:

- what you want to say and why
- how the other person might react
- how you might feel about their reaction.

It can help to let the other person know you want to talk about something private. Some people may not know cancer and its treatment can affect your sex life or fertility. They may not know what to say, or may have their own feelings to cope with. Even people who understand can find it hard to talk about these issues.

## Talking to a partner

If you are in a relationship, try to be honest about how you feel. If cancer or its treatment have changed how you feel about your body or sex, let your partner know. This gives them the chance to understand and support you. You might also find they have questions to ask you. Try to listen to and answer each other's questions and concerns.

## Talking to a friend

You may find it hard to talk to your friends after being diagnosed with cancer. You may feel even your closest friends do not understand what you are going through. It may help to explain to one or two friends what it is like for you.

Some people find it easier to talk to someone who has had cancer treatment. Some organisations run support groups or online groups. Or you can ask your healthcare team for information about groups in your area. If you are 16 or over, you can join our Online Community at [macmillan.org.uk/community](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/community)

## Talking to family

All families are different. Some talk about relationships and sex openly, while others might not. There may be people in your family who you are comfortable talking to. But it can sometimes be hard to talk about certain things, especially if you find they get upset.

Some families and communities have strong views about fertility and having fertility treatments. They may also have opinions about being straight, gay, bisexual or trans. This could make it harder to talk openly about relationships and sex with them – especially if they do not know cancer and its treatment can affect these things. You may find people sometimes seem insensitive, but they may not realise the effect of what they are saying.

If you are worried about talking to your family, it may help to speak to someone from your healthcare team first. They may be able to give you advice and support. Sometimes they can help you prepare for a hard conversation. They might even be able to be with you when you talk to your family.



## Talking to your healthcare team

Your healthcare team can give you information and support during and after cancer treatment. They are experts and will understand any issues you have. If you have questions about sex or relationships, ask them. They will understand these questions are important to you.

You may have questions you do not want to ask in front of your partner, family or other people. Let your cancer doctor or specialist nurse know you want to talk about something privately. They will arrange a time and place to do this. If there is someone in the team you feel more comfortable with, you can ask to talk to them.

If you finished cancer treatment some time ago, you can ask questions at your follow-up clinic appointments or talk to your GP. Remember, your healthcare team often talk to people about sex, feelings and how the body works. They will not be surprised or embarrassed.

### What can you ask?

You can ask your healthcare team about anything. If you are worried about something, it has probably been a problem for someone else too. You might want to talk about your feelings and how you are coping. You may also have questions about how your body works now or about having sex.

You do not need to know all the right words about sex or your body. Just explain what is wrong in your own words and say how you feel about it. If someone uses words you do not understand, ask them to explain. If the information or support does not help, ask again.

## How can they help?

Your healthcare team may be able to give you information or support to cope with a problem. They may also know about other people who can help you. Sometimes they can arrange for you to see other professionals, for example a specialist doctor, counsellor or social worker. Or they may give you information about other organisations or groups that you can contact.

## Will they tell anyone else?

Your healthcare team usually keep anything you share with them private. That means they will not tell other people that you have spoken to them, or what you talked about, unless you want them to. This is even if you are under 16.

The only time they will tell someone else is if they think you have been harmed or are at risk of harm. This is rare, and they will try to tell you first if they are going to do this.

Sometimes a professional may ask your permission to talk to other professionals who are seeing you. For example, a counsellor may want to tell your doctor they have seen you. But it is your decision whether you want them to share this information.

# More questions about cancer and sex

## Can I pass cancer on by having sex?

No. Cancer cannot be passed on to a partner through sex.

## Will having sex make cancer come back?

No. Having sex does not increase the chance of cancer coming back.

## How long will my side effects last?

It depends on the cancer treatment you had and the type of side effect. Some side effects are short-term and get better slowly after you finish treatment. Others may last longer or sometimes become a long-term problem. Remember, it is possible to improve most side effects or make them easier to cope with. Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse can give you more advice and support.

## Do my healthcare team need to know if I'm gay, bisexual or trans?

Your healthcare team want to support you and treat you in a way you feel comfortable with. There may be times when it helps them to know your gender identity or sexual orientation. It may help you feel better supported. It also means they can give the right information and support to you and to your partner if you have one.

You do not have to talk to them about this if you do not want to. It will not change your cancer treatment.

If you want to talk, but not to people you know, you can still get support. You may find it easier to talk to someone from your healthcare team privately. Or you may want to talk to someone from a support organisation.

## Can I masturbate?

Yes. Masturbating can be a good way to relax. It can help you get to know your body during and after treatment, and to find out what feels good for you. It does not cause cancer or make cancer grow.

## Should I have the HPV vaccination?

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is a very common virus linked to some types of cancer, including cancer of the cervix (cervical cancer) in women. The NHS currently offers vaccination injections to protect against HPV to girls from age 12 or 13 up to their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. In the future, these injections will also be offered to boys.

The NHS also offers HPV injections to men who have sex with men and to transgender people. Your GP or local sexual health service can give you more information.

If you missed any of your HPV injections because of your cancer treatment, you may still be able to have them. They may not work as well if cancer treatment has affected your immune system. Ask your cancer doctor for advice about the best time to have your injections.

If you had your HPV injections before you had chemotherapy, you may be offered an extra booster dose after your treatment finishes.

If you had your HPV injections before you had a stem cell transplant, you may be able to have them again. Your cancer doctor or specialist nurse will give you information about having vaccinations after your treatment.

Cervical cancer can also be prevented by regular screening tests. From the age of 25, women and trans men who still have a cervix should have screening every few years.

You can find information about cervical screening in our booklet **Understanding cervical screening results and CIN** (see page 60).

## **If I have an early menopause, are there any treatments I can have to help with the effects?**

You can have treatment and support to cope with any symptoms and the emotional effects of an early menopause. You can also have treatment to protect you from the long-term effects of the menopause. This can include thinning of the bones (osteoporosis) and heart disease.

You may be offered:

- support from your GP or a specialist who treats women who have had an early menopause
- treatment and advice to help you cope with symptoms
- hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or a type of hormonal contraceptive to prevent long-term effects.

Your doctor will explain the possible risks and benefits of any treatment to you. Some women cannot take HRT safely because of the type of cancer they have. Your doctor will tell you whether this treatment is suitable for you.

# Who else can help?

There are lots of ways to get support and information. But you may need to go to different places for different things.

Your healthcare team is always a good place to start. This section has some ideas of who else can help.

## Information about sex

Your local sexual health service can give you free and confidential information about:

- contraception
- sex and relationships
- sexually transmitted infections
- health and well-being.

You can find your nearest service and get more information from:

- **England** – visit [nhs.uk/Livewell/Sexualhealthtopics](https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Sexualhealthtopics) or call the National Sexual Health Helpline on **0300 123 7123**.
- **Scotland** – visit [sexualhealthscotland.co.uk](https://www.sexualhealthscotland.co.uk) or call the Information Line on **0800 22 44 88**.
- **Wales** – visit [nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/LiveWell/LifestyleWellbeing/Sexualhealth](https://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/LiveWell/LifestyleWellbeing/Sexualhealth) or call the Sexual Health Helpline on **0800 567 123**.
- **Northern Ireland** – visit [sexualhealthni.info](https://www.sexualhealthni.info)

## Information about relationships

There is a lot of information about relationships online. Here are some websites aimed at teenagers and younger adults:

- Brook – [brook.org.uk/your-life](https://www.brook.org.uk/your-life)
- The Mix – [themix.org.uk](https://www.themix.org.uk)

Relate also offers a range of online, face-to-face or phone services to help with relationships. Visit [relate.org.uk](https://www.relate.org.uk) or call **0300 100 1234**.

## Support for teenagers or young people with cancer

Your healthcare team can give you information about any support groups in your area.

The organisations below offer information, support and events for young people affected by cancer:

- Teenage Cancer Trust – [teenagecancertrust.org](https://www.teenagecancertrust.org)
- CLIC Sargent – [clicsargent.org.uk](https://www.clicsargent.org.uk)
- Children’s Cancer and Leukaemia Group – [cclg.org.uk](https://www.cclg.org.uk)
- Trekstock – [trekstock.com](https://www.trekstock.com)
- Shine Cancer Support – [shinecancersupport.org](https://www.shinecancersupport.org)

## Support for lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans (LGBT+) young people

These organisations offer support and information for young people who are LGBT+:

- LGBT Youth Scotland – [lgbtyouth.org.uk](http://lgbtyouth.org.uk)
- Switchboard LGBT+ – [switchboard.lgbt](http://switchboard.lgbt) or call **0300 330 0630**.

## Specialist professionals

There are lots of specialists who can help with different things. Your healthcare team may arrange for you to see a specialist if you need more support or advice. This section lists some types of specialist and what they might offer.

### **Counsellors, therapists, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists**

These specialists are all slightly different. They can all help you understand and cope with your feelings and hard situations. They do that by talking and listening to you. Sometimes they can give you advice or ideas to help you cope.

### **Fertility or reproductive specialist**

A doctor who specialises in treatments to help people get pregnant.

## **Sex therapists**

This is usually a healthcare professional who supports people with sexual problems. They can often help you work out whether a problem is physical, emotional or both. They offer advice and exercises that may help.

## **Gynaecologist**

A specialist doctor who treats female reproductive system problems.

## **Urologist**

A specialist doctor who treats male or female urinary tract problems. They also treat male reproductive system problems.

## **Endocrinologist**

A specialist doctor who treats hormonal problems.



# FURTHER INFORMATION

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# About our information

We provide expert, up-to-date information about cancer. And all our information is free for everyone.

## Order what you need

You may want to order more booklets or leaflets like this one. Visit [be.macmillan.org.uk](https://www.be.macmillan.org.uk) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

We have booklets about different cancer types, treatments and side effects. We also have information about work, financial issues, diet, life after cancer treatment and information for carers, family and friends.

## Online information

All our information is also available online at [macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support](https://www.be.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support) You can also find videos featuring stories from people affected by cancer, and information from health and social care professionals.

## Other formats

We also provide information in different languages and formats, including:

- audiobooks
- Braille
- British Sign Language
- easy read booklets
- eBooks
- large print
- translations.

Find out more at [macmillan.org.uk/otherformats](https://www.be.macmillan.org.uk/otherformats)

If you would like us to produce information in a different format for you, email us at [cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk](mailto:cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

# Other ways we can help you

At Macmillan, we know how a cancer diagnosis can affect everything, and we're here to support you.

## Talk to us

If you or someone you know is affected by cancer, talking about how you feel and sharing your concerns can really help.

### Macmillan Support Line

Our free, confidential phone line is open 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Our cancer support specialists can:

- help with any medical questions you have about cancer or your treatment
- help you access benefits and give you financial guidance
- be there to listen if you need someone to talk to
- tell you about services that can help you in your area.

Call us on **0808 808 00 00** or email us via our website, [macmillan.org.uk/talktous](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/talktous)

## Information centres

Our information and support centres are based in hospitals, libraries and mobile centres. There, you can speak with someone face to face.

Visit one to get the information you need, or if you'd like a private chat, most centres have a room where you can speak with someone alone and in confidence.

Find your nearest centre at [macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

## Talk to others

No one knows more about the impact cancer can have on your life than those who have been through it themselves. That's why we help to bring people together in their communities and online.

## Support groups

Whether you are someone living with cancer or a carer, we can help you find support in your local area, so you can speak face to face with people who understand. Find out about support groups in your area by calling us or by visiting [macmillan.org.uk/selfhelpandsupport](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/selfhelpandsupport)

## Online Community

Thousands of people use our Online Community to make friends, blog about their experiences and join groups to meet other people going through the same things. You can access it any time of day or night. Share your experiences, ask questions, or just read through people's posts at [macmillan.org.uk/community](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/community)

## The Macmillan healthcare team

Our nurses, doctors and other health and social care professionals give expert care and support to individuals and their families. Call us or ask your GP, consultant, district nurse or hospital ward sister if there are any Macmillan professionals near you.

## Book reviews

Our volunteers review many books about cancer. These include people's stories of living with cancer, and books for children. Visit [publications.macmillan.org.uk](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/publications) and search 'book reviews'.

'Everyone is so supportive on the Online Community, they know exactly what you're going through. It can be fun too. It's not all just chats about cancer.'

Mal

## Help with money worries

Having cancer can bring extra costs such as hospital parking, travel fares and higher heating bills. If you've been affected in this way, we can help.

### Financial guidance

Our financial team can give you guidance on mortgages, pensions, insurance, borrowing and savings.

### Help accessing benefits

Our benefits advisers can offer advice and information on benefits, tax credits, grants and loans. They can help you work out what financial help you could be entitled to. They can also help you complete your forms and apply for benefits.

### Macmillan Grants

Macmillan offers one-off payments to people with cancer. A grant can be for anything from heating bills or extra clothing to a much-needed break.

Call us on **0808 808 00 00** to speak to a financial guide or benefits adviser, or to find out more about Macmillan Grants.

We can also tell you about benefits advisers in your area. Visit **macmillan.org.uk/financialsupport** to find out more about how we can help you with your finances.

## Help with work and cancer

Whether you're an employee, a carer, an employer or are self-employed, we can provide support and information to help you manage cancer at work.

Visit **macmillan.org.uk/work**

### Work support

Our dedicated team of work support advisers can help you understand your rights at work. Call us on **0808 808 00 00** to speak to a work support adviser (Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm).

## Macmillan Organiser

This includes a records book to write down information such as appointments, medications and contact details. You can also download the app on IOS or Android.

## Other useful organisations

There are lots of other organisations that can give you information or support.

### Emotional support

#### **British Infertility Counselling Association**

**Email** [info@bica.net](mailto:info@bica.net)

**www.bica.net**

Provides counselling and support to people affected by infertility. Use the website to find a counsellor in your area.

#### **Relate**

**Tel** 0300 003 0396

**www.relate.org.uk**

Offers relationship counselling for individuals and couples, family counselling, mediation, children and young people's counselling and sex therapy. There are Relate centres across the UK, as well as local counsellors who provide face-to-face counselling and support. You can also get counselling on phone, email and live chat.

#### **The Mix**

**Helpline** 0808 808 4994

**www.themix.org.uk**

Provides free, confidential support for young people under 25 via their helpline, email, group chat and one to one chat.

### Early menopause support

#### **The Daisy Network**

**Email** [info@daisynetwork.org.uk](mailto:info@daisynetwork.org.uk)

**www.daisynetwork.org.uk**

A support group for women who have had an early menopause. The website gives information about early menopause and related issues. Paying members have access to extra support, information and online forums.

## Information about sex and relationships

### Brook

**[www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)**

Provides free and confidential sexual health and well-being services for under 25s through their website and at centres across the UK. You can use the website to find a sexual health service in your area.

### The National Sexual Healthline

**Tel 0300 123 7123**

Provides sensitive and confidential advice about sexual health issues.

## Support for lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans (LGBT) young people

### LGBT Foundation

**Helpline 0345 330 3030**

**Email [helpline@lgbt.foundation](mailto:helpline@lgbt.foundation)**

**[www.lgbt.foundation](http://www.lgbt.foundation)**

Provides a range of services to the LGBT community, including a helpline, email advice and counselling.

### LGBT Youth Scotland

**Email [info@lgbtyouth.org.uk](mailto:info@lgbtyouth.org.uk)**

**[www.lgbtyouth.org.uk](http://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk)**

Support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans young people in Scotland. Get in touch if you have a question, need advice or support, or are just looking for someone to talk to.

### Switchboard LGBT+

**Helpline 0300 330 0630**

**Email [chris@switchboard.lgbt](mailto:chris@switchboard.lgbt)**

**[www.switchboard.lgbt](http://www.switchboard.lgbt)**

The helpline gives advice, information and referrals to people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and their families and friends.

## **Support for young people with cancer**

### **Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group (CCLG)**

**Tel** 0333 050 7654

**Email** [info@cclg.org.uk](mailto:info@cclg.org.uk)

**[www.cclg.org.uk](http://www.cclg.org.uk)**

Provides information about childhood cancers, including information for teenagers and young adults who have had a childhood cancer.

### **CLIC Sargent**

**Tel** 0300 330 0803

**[www.clicsargent.org.uk](http://www.clicsargent.org.uk)**

Provides clinical, practical, financial and emotional support to children with cancer in the UK.

### **Shine Cancer Support**

**[www.shinecancersupport.org](http://www.shinecancersupport.org)**

Support for adults in their 20s, 30s and 40s affected by cancer.

### **Teenage Cancer Trust**

**Tel** 0207 612 0370

(Mon to Fri, 9am to 5.30pm)

**Email** [hello@](mailto:hello@teenagecancertrust.org)

[teenagecancertrust.org](http://teenagecancertrust.org)

**[www.teenagecancertrust.org](http://www.teenagecancertrust.org)**

A UK-wide charity devoted to improving the lives of teenagers and young adults with cancer. Runs a support network for young people with cancer, their friends and families.

### **Trekstock**

**[www.trekstock.com](http://www.trekstock.com)**

Provide support, practical advice and an active community for young adults in their 20s and 30s affected by cancer.





## Disclaimer

We make every effort to ensure that the information we provide is accurate and up to date but it should not be relied upon as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. So far as is permitted by law, Macmillan does not accept liability in relation to the use of any information contained in this publication, or third-party information or websites included or referred to in it. Some photos are of models.

## Thanks

This booklet has been written, revised and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been approved by our Senior Medical Editor, Dr Gill Levitt, Honorary Paediatric Oncologist.

With thanks to: Dr Julia Chisholm, Consultant in Paediatric and TYA Oncology; Dr Victoria Grandage, Consultant Haematologist for the Children and Young People's Cancer Service University College London Hospitals; and Louise Soanes, Teenage Cancer Trust Nurse Consultant for Adolescents and Young Adults.

Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this edition, and to those who shared their stories.

We welcome feedback on our information. If you have any, please contact **[cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk](mailto:cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk)**

## Sources

We've listed a sample of the sources used in the publication below. If you'd like further information about the sources we use, please contact us at **[cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk](mailto:cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk)**

Bober et al. Sexual Function in Childhood Cancer Survivors: A Report from the Project REACH. *Journal of Sexual Medicine*. 2013. 10.

Royal College of Physicians, The Royal College of Radiologists, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. *The Effects of Cancer Treatment on Reproductive Functions: Guidance on Management*. Report of a Working Party. London: RCP, 2007.

# Can you do something to help?

We hope this booklet has been useful to you. It's just one of our many publications that are available free to anyone affected by cancer. They're produced by our cancer information specialists who, along with our nurses, benefits advisers, campaigners and volunteers, are part of the Macmillan team. When people are facing the toughest fight of their lives, we're there to support them every step of the way.

We want to make sure no one has to go through cancer alone, so we need more people to help us. When the time is right for you, here are some ways in which you can become a part of our team.



## **Share your cancer experience**

Support people living with cancer by telling your story, online, in the media or face to face.

## **Campaign for change**

We need your help to make sure everyone gets the right support. Take an action, big or small, for better cancer care.

## **Help someone in your community**

A lift to an appointment. Help with the shopping. Or just a cup of tea and a chat. Could you lend a hand?

## **Raise money**

Whatever you like doing you can raise money to help. Take part in one of our events or create your own.

## **Give money**

Big or small, every penny helps. To make a one-off donation see over.

## **Call us to find out more**

# 0300 1000 200

[macmillan.org.uk/getinvolved](http://macmillan.org.uk/getinvolved)

## Please fill in your personal details

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Other \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Surname \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Please accept my gift of £ \_\_\_\_\_

(Please delete as appropriate)

I enclose a cheque / postal order /  
Charity Voucher made payable to  
Macmillan Cancer Support

OR debit my:

Visa / MasterCard / CAF Charity  
Card / Switch / Maestro

Card number

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Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date

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## Don't let the taxman keep your money

Do you pay tax? If so, your gift will be worth 25% more to us – at no extra cost to you. All you have to do is tick the box below, and the tax office will give 25p for every pound you give.

- I am a UK tax payer and I would like Macmillan Cancer Support to treat all donations I make or have made to Macmillan Cancer Support in the last 4 years as Gift Aid donations, until I notify you otherwise.

I understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference. I understand Macmillan Cancer Support will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I give.

Macmillan Cancer Support and our trading companies would like to hold your details in order to contact you about our fundraising, campaigning and services for people affected by cancer. If you would prefer us not to use your details in this way please tick this box.

In order to carry out our work we may need to pass your details to agents or partners who act on our behalf.



If you'd rather donate online go to [macmillan.org.uk/donate](https://macmillan.org.uk/donate)

Please cut out this form and return it in an envelope (no stamp required) to:  
Supporter Donations, Macmillan Cancer Support, FREEPOST LON15851,  
89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ

This booklet is about cancer, sex and relationships. It is for teenagers and young people who are having or have had cancer treatment. It explains how cancer and cancer treatment may affect your relationships and sex life. It also gives information about coping with any changes and how to get more support.

We're here to help everyone with cancer live life as fully as they can, providing physical, financial and emotional support. So whatever cancer throws your way, we're right there with you. For information, support or just someone to talk to, call 0808 808 00 00 (7 days a week, 8am to 8pm) or visit [macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk)

Would you prefer to speak to us in another language? Interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use. Are you deaf or hard of hearing? Call us using NGT (Text Relay) on 18001 0808 808 00 00, or use the NGT Lite app.

Need information in different languages or formats? We produce information in audio, eBooks, easy read, Braille, large print and translations. To order these, visit [macmillan.org.uk/otherformats](http://macmillan.org.uk/otherformats) or call our support line.

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**CANCER SUPPORT**

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