Sexual Recovery: Education and Sexual Aids

Sex-Positive Education

Popular culture often provides artificial images and unrealistic expectations of women’s bodies and sexual activity. This can lead to shame, embarrassment and difficulties engaging fully with sexual activity. Sex educators such as Betty Dodson have worked to provide accurate, sex-positive, and body-positive education that addresses common misconceptions. These are some resources may help people understand that there is a wide range of “normal” sexual reproductive organs (e.g., vulva styles) and that the majority of women require clitoral stimulation (rather than just penetration) to achieve orgasm.

Helpful websites:

- [https://dodsonandross.com](https://dodsonandross.com)
- [https://www.omgyes.com/](https://www.omgyes.com/)
- [https://www.bloodandmilk.com/category/sex-intimacy/](https://www.bloodandmilk.com/category/sex-intimacy/)
- [https://www.dana-farber.org/health-library/articles/sexual-health,-intimacy,-and-cancer/](https://www.dana-farber.org/health-library/articles/sexual-health,-intimacy,-and-cancer/)

Sexual Rehabilitation

As with after many medical treatments, some sexual rehabilitation may be required after cancer treatment. For example, cancer treatment or other changes in your body (e.g., menopause) may cause symptoms such as vaginal dryness or discomfort with sexual activity. Please see our other teaching sheet for information on addressing vaginal dryness.

When you experience pain or discomfort during sexual activity, your pelvic floor muscles may tense, causing sexual activity to become even more painful. This automatic muscle clenching of the pelvic floor can also make pelvic exams painful. There is pelvic floor rehabilitation which can directly help people learn to relax the pelvic floor and regain control of these muscles. Vaginal dilators are often a key component of pelvic floor rehabilitation. Dilators are used methodically to slowly help tissue become more elastic and improve vaginal capacity, which can significantly reduce pain with sexual
activity. This can be either done on your own or with the guidance of a pelvic floor physical therapist. Please refer to our Pelvic Floor Therapist Guide for potential physical therapists in your area.

A single vibrating dilator (e.g., https://milliforher.com/) that can also be adjusted to different sizes (by the millimeter) is an alternative to using separate dilators of increasing sizes.

Pelvic floor physical therapists may also work with women on trigger point release and tender point pain using a vibrating wand. https://www.intimaterose.com/collections/pelvic-wands
Pain can also occur during sexual activity when penetration is too deep (e.g., after surgery for cervical cancer shortens the vagina). The Ohnut (https://ohnut.co/) is a wearable ring placed at the base of a partner’s penis to customize penetration depth and reduce pain. This is also sold at the Friend’s Boutique: https://www.danafarberfriendsplace.org/store/p453/Ohnut_Set.html.

Sexual Aids

Although some women can orgasm through penetration alone, most women need direct clitoral stimulation to achieve orgasm. Clitoral stimulation can be done manually (e.g., using fingers or tongue) or with the use of sexual aids such as vibrators. After cancer treatment or menopause women often report that more stimulation is needed to reach orgasm due to a variety of factors (e.g., reductions in estrogen) and often women benefit from using sexual aids.

Vibrators are sexual aids which can increase the intensity of clitoral stimulation and make it easier to reach orgasm. They can be used during masturbation (self-touch) or with a partner. They also help get oxygenated blood flow to the vaginal tissue which promotes vaginal health recovery. Some vibrators are designed to be used externally, while others can be inserted into the vagina. They can range from $15 to hundreds of dollars. Dildos are objects typically shaped like an erect penis that can inserted into the vagina for sexual stimulation.

Helpful websites:

Good Vibrations: https://www.goodvibes.com

Dana-Farber Gift Store: https://www.dana-farberfriendsplace.org/store/p454/Intimina_Raya_Massager_.html

Amazon: https://www.amazon.com/s?k=vibrator&ref=nb_sb_noss_2

Pure Romance: https://www.pureromance.com/Pws/homeoffice/store/OCUS/catalog/sex-toys
Sexual Desire

After cancer treatment or menopause sexual desire often becomes less spontaneous. Desire is certainly diminished if you have pain or discomfort with sexual activity or if you feel worried about intimacy. However, desire is also an experience that can be cultivated. After you have addressed any issues causing pain (e.g., successfully started using a vaginal moisturizer to address vaginal dryness, improving pelvic floor health) you may want to focus on enhancing desire and increasing sensual experience. Erotica, literature or art intended to arouse sexual desire, may be helpful in cultivating desire.

Erotic Literature (e.g., romance novels) can help us engage in sexual fantasy and cultivate sexual desire. This literature has been designed for all types of fantasies and can be found in the romance section of bookstores as well as online.

Helpful Websites:

Smile Makers: https://smilemakerscollection.com/blog/category/erotica-for-women/

Bellesa: https://www.bellesa.co/story/all

Barnes and Noble: https://www.barnesandnoble.com/b/books/romantic-fiction-themes/erotic-romance/_/N-29Z8q8Z17zj

Erotic Videos can also be a very effective way of exploring fantasy alone or with a partner. Although the majority of pornography is designed for men, there are some websites designing erotic videos specifically for women that are body- and sex-positive.
Helpful Websites:

Erika Lust: https://erikalust.com/

XConfessions: https://xconfessions.com/

Crashpad Queer Porn: https://crashpadseries.com/queer-porn/

Bright Desire: https://brightdesire.com/tour/

Additional Resources about Sexual Health for Cancer Survivors


OncoLink: https://www.oncolink.org/support/sexuality-fertility/sexuality


Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center: https://www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/patient-education/

Woman Lab: https://womanlab.org