

Sexual Health in Women Across the Life Span with Cancer

Colorado Cancer Coalition
Annual Symposium – Together We Can
Survivorship Session
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Speaker Disclosures & Conflicts

Helen L. Coons, PhD does not have conflicts of interest or disclosure related to the content of this presentation.

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Presentation Limitations

- Evidenced on this topic is overwhelmingly based on white, middle class, educated individuals who were "classified" cisgender vs asking participants about gender identity.
- We need inclusive language & classifications in research in sexual medicine to recognize the diversity & intersectionality of patients' identities & the implications of findings for translation & dissemination to varied populations, communities & clinical settings.
- We are well-positioned to advance inclusive language in our research, practice, education & training & advocacy related to persons' health & mental health care.
- Clinical examples or "cases" will primarily focus on sexual health issues among persons with cancer without serious mental illness.

American Psychological Association (2021). Inclusive language guide (2nd ed.). <https://www.apa.org/health/your-health/identity-inclusive-language-guidelines.pdf>
American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (2022). Inclusive language statement of policy.

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Sexual Health in Women with Cancer

Normal part of human experience across the life span
Common survivorship & behavioral health issue
Changes in body image & sexual health during & after ca treatment(s)
Impacts
Physical, psychological, sexual & relational wellbeing
Distress levels & QoL
Treatable conditions with evidenced-informed interventions
Preventable symptoms & conditions

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Sexual Health in Women with Cancer

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Sexual Challenges in Women with Cancer

General Population of Women in US		> 40 % with sexual health concerns
Menopause	GSM	42-88%
Breast cancers	Unhappy with appearance Sexual desire, satisfaction & function	60% 40-83%
Gyn cancers	Uterine, Ovarian, Vulvar, Cervical, etc.	60%+
Colorectal & anal cancers		70%+
Hematological cancers	Leukemia, Lymphomas	

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Common Sexual Concerns in Women Across the Life Span

Low Desire Orgasm
 Arousal Pain
 Dyspareunia
 Vaginismus

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Together We Can Improve Sexual Health in Women with Cancer

- With different types of cancer types
- With early & advanced disease
- Across the life span
- Across relational status
- From diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds
- Who identify as gender diverse
- With intersecting identities

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Improving Sexual Health in Women with Cancer > **Clinical Pearls**

- Assessment, treatment & prevention perspective to improve body image & sexual health
- Watch biases related to age, relationships, stage of cancer
- Normalized the conversations about sexual health in clinical care
- Ask direct questions – pts are not likely to bring up sexual issues
- Create safety for open discussions about sexual health
- Help pts/couples with words to talk about sexual health & symptoms
- Use pt/couple language
- Honor pts' cultural perspective on sexuality, sex & sexual activity
- Consider power dynamics in relationship(s)
- Screen for trauma hx & IPV
- Use TIC approaches
- Educate women early & often
- Focus on preventing sexual SE of ca & tx
- Aim for early symptom reduction & management
- Intervene in all or nothing sexual activity
- Refer early for additional eval & tx
- Work collaboratively to improve pt sexual health
- Provide reliable ed & clinical tools

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Ask Direct Questions about Body Image & Sexual Health

- Take a hx > **But first >>>> STOP!**
- Explain clinical rationale for detailed questions about sexual health & functioning
- Create safety
- Evaluate safety
- Provide culturally/population relevant care
- General questions >
 - Desire, Arousal, Lubrication, Pain, Anorgasmia, Pelvic trauma

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Body Image > Impacts Sexual Desire, Mood, Distress

Incisions	Amputations
Hair loss, alopecia, hirsutism	Asymmetries
Rashes	Loss of sensation
Burns	Speech/language challenges
Lymphedema	Cognitive changes
Continuous Glucose Monitors/Insulin Pumps	Portable oxygen
Gate challenges	Weight loss/gain
Colostomy/ostomy	Burden of multiple chronic conditions
Mastectomy	

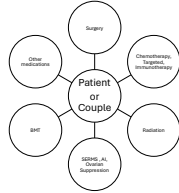
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Changes in Sexual Health?

- Have you noticed a change in your sexual energy or desire since your ca dx?
- When did you notice that your sexual desire declined or changed?
- Has low desire always been part of your life or was there a time when you had more sexual energy?
- Do you experience pain during intercourse or other types of penetration?
- Are you & your partner having difficulty talking about sexual issues?
- Are you worried about dating because of your cancer, treatment & their impact on your sexual health?

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Effects of Treatments for Cancer on Sexual Health



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Impact of Cancer Surgery on Sexual Functioning

- Post-operative pain
- Post-surgical reduced range of motion
 - Incisions, Lymphedema
- Oophorectomy---sudden menopause
- Change in shape of vagina
- Urinary issues---UTI's, frequency, spasms
- Bowel changes---frequency, urgency, tenesmus
- Post-surgical muscle & neurological changes, paresthesia's

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Impact of Chemotherapy/Targeted/Immunotherapy/Hormonal Therapies on Sexual Health

- N/V, weakness, fatigue, pain
- Body image
- Hair loss, weight changes, infusion catheters
- Chemo-induced menopause
- Vaginal drying
- Chemo-related neuropathy
- Rash, skin changes
- Blood pressure
- Head aches

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Impact of Radiation (XRT) for on Sexual Health

- **Early & late effects of XRT**
- Nausea/vomiting
- Fatigue
- Skin reactions
- Pain
- Infections
- Swelling
- Adhesions
- Lymphedema

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Medications impact Sexual Desire & Functioning

- Iatrogenic side effects
- Anti-emetics
- Anxiolytics
- Pain meds
- Anti-depressants
- Ovarian suppression
- SERMS/Aromatase inhibitors
- Anti-hypertensives
- Anti-histamines
- Anti-lipids

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Vaginal Drying, Menopause & Sexual Health in Women with Cancer

- **Genitourinary Syndrome of Menopause > GSM**
NAMS - Contemporary ObGyn.Net
- Estrogen loss
 - Menopause
 - Chemotherapy
 - Surgery
 - Radiation
 - SERMS & AI
 - Ovarian suppression
 - Other medications

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Common Treatment Approaches to Sexual Symptoms

- Reduce pain & fatigue
- No life energy > little sexual energy > little desire
- Decrease all or nothing sexual patterns
- Post-Coital Bleeding
 - Vaginal Lubricants & Moisturizers
 - Vaginal dilators
 - Topical hormonal & non-hormonal preparations
- Bleeding related to Semen
 - Dilators
 - Vaginal Lubricants & Moisturizers
 - Topical hormonal & non-hormonal preparations
- Dyspareunia
 - Vaginal Lubricants & Moisturizers
 - Topical hormonal & non-hormonal preparations
 - Changes in practice for intercourse
 - Physical & kinesiopsych PT
- CBT & Relaxation & mindfulness techniques
- Sex Therapy Approaches
 - Sensate focus techniques
- Exercise to Improve Body Image, Mood, Energy
- Medications to Improve Desire

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Interprofessional Team Approach

- Indications for referral
- Who to refer to
- Timing
- Communication across team
- Patient/couple satisfaction

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Diagnostic Evaluation, Prevention & Treatment Options

- Gynecologist with training in sexual medicine
- Urogynecologist
- PT with expertise in pelvic rehab/PT
- Clinical Health psychologist with expertise in psychosocial oncology & sexual health
- Sex therapist
- Psychiatrist or Psych NP
 - Review & change medications

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Young Women with Cancer

- Sexual SE associated with increased distress
- Body image & distress
- Limited sexual experience before cancer dx
- To date or not
- When to disclose or not
- How to disclose
- Social media & disclosure of cancer/chronic conditions
- Pregnancy & fertility concerns
- Contraceptives

Coons (2016, 2024)

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Sexual Health Concerns in Single Women with Cancer

- Across life span
- Ask about relationship status
- Sexually active?
- Concerns about disclosure of cancer
- Concerns about sexual function
- Cultural context

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Sexual Health in Women with Cancer from Marginalized Communities

Marginalized communities

- Racial/ethnic groups
- Religious/cultural beliefs
- Refugees & immigrants
- LGBTQI identities
- Abilities/disabilities
- Neuro-diversity

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Sexual Health Resources

- Cancer.gov
- American Cancer Society (ACS) - www.cancer.gov
- Scientific Network on Female Sexual Health & Cancer
- NCI Office of Cancer Survivorship - dceps.nci.nih.gov
- Oncolink – oncolink.org
- Young Survival Coalition - www.youngsurvival.org
- American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors & Therapists (AASECT) - www.aasect.org
- International Society for the Study of Women's Sexual Health (ISSWSH)

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Sexual Health in Cancer Survivorship

Together >
 Improve sexual health, functioning & satisfaction
 Prevent or minimize sexual side effects during & after tx
 Improve emotional & relational well-being
 Promote QoL
 In women across the life span with early & advanced cancer

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