

Psycho-oncology department

Changes to your body after cancer treatment (vulval and vaginal health)

Introduction

Many women report that their illness or treatment has affected them both physically and in terms of how they think and feel about themselves. There is lots of evidence that women affected by cancer may experience changes in their body, how it works and difficulties in their sexual relationships following diagnosis and or treatment. Sometimes women notice these changes straight away but for others it may be years after treatment.

This leaflet is best used alongside talking to your healthcare professionals about changes in your vulval and vaginal health due to treatment. We can help you understand these differences and consider ways to support better vulval and vaginal health.

Changes to relationships

Your relationships with your partner, family and friends may be affected by cancer. You may feel well supported but sometimes the reactions of others can be hard to cope with. During treatment many people 'just get on with it' but find afterwards that relationships have altered. It is normal to experience these challenges. It can help to involve your partner or others during your treatment and recovery by ensuring they have information about what is happening to you and how you feel.

You may find your roles and sense of identity have changed during treatment. For example if you have been unable to work or look after family. Sometimes the expectations you have of yourself or believe others have of you "stay positive" can actually have a detrimental effect. It is usual for you or others around you to have worries and addressing your concerns can help you work through these changes.

Talking with your health professional and sharing your experience with others who have been through treatment can also be helpful. You may also benefit from finding a safe space to talk to a trained counsellor individually or as a couple for joint counselling. Communication is often the key, as is being prepared to work at moving towards accepting the changes whether they are temporary or permanent.

Changes in your body

The physical changes in your body due to surgery, treatment or hormones can make you feel different and some women say they feel less confident as a result. Your health professional can help you understand the changes to your body and why you may feel different.



Changes in sex and intimacy

Many women find their body and sexual relationships change and this is not always addressed by health professionals, even though often support and treatment can be offered. Talking about body changes, sex and our sexual relationships with a health professional may not be easy but it can be beneficial. It is also important to talk to your partner about your body changes and sexual relationship even if this is something you do not normally do. Partners may be fearful of causing you pain or you may be worried about how they will react to your body able to communicate these concerns will help both of you. When being intimate or reintroducing intimacy it is important to go slowly and go at a pace that suits you.

Some women who are not in a partnership during their treatment may be concerned about talking to a new partner about their body changes and sex. Opening up this dialogue may be challenging, however being open and honest as you get to know someone is usually helpful.

More specific support can be offered by a psychosexual therapist, who is experienced in addressing adjustments in your sexual relationships. You can find a therapist on the College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists website www.cosrt.org.uk

Mindfulness and body awareness

Following treatment you may find it difficult to think about your body or look at how it has changed and this can lead to feeling disconnected from yourself. Learning to become aware of your body again through specific exercises will allow you to connect your mind with body sensations and this can help with re-establishing good sexual relationships. Using some of the following methods may be helpful. Mindfulness

- Breathing exercises
- Progressive muscle relaxation

Engaging with a body awareness programme with the support of your health professional can help you to reconnect with your body and help you and your partner establish a more intimate sexual relationship again. Visit www.getselfhelp.co.uk for further information.

Maintaining good pelvic floor tone using Kegel exercises

We recommend learning and practising these exercises as they will help:

- Gain control (both tensing and relaxing) of the muscles at the opening of the vagina
- Improve awareness of vulval and vaginal sensations
- Improve orgasm
- Prevent and treat incontinence of urine

Learning to focus on the relaxing stage in this exercise will also increase your awareness and ability to relax the vaginal muscles which may help if you feel anxious during sexual activity.

Your health professional can teach you and provide you with further information about pelvic floor/Kegel exercises. The Christie leaflet 'Pelvic floor exercises for women' may be helpful to you. It is available from the cancer information centre or online at www.christie.nhs.uk

Menopause

Menopausal symptoms, such as weight changes, sleep disturbances, mood changes, hot flushes, night sweats and vaginal dryness can be distressing for some women. This can impact on your thoughts and feelings affecting you both physically and emotionally. It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish which symptoms are side effects of treatment, menopausal symptoms or the impact on you and how you are thinking and feeling due to all the changes in your life since your diagnosis.

Behavioural approaches such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can help you learn to manage symptoms. Some women find complementary therapies are also helpful. Taking practical steps and making positive adaptations to your behaviours and how you care for yourself can assist by ensuring you have some control and help avoid future problems.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or topical oestrogen may be helpful to manage menopausal symptoms. Please talk to your cancer healthcare professionals about whether this is appropriate for you.

You may find www.menopausematters.co.uk website useful or for younger women, www.daisynetwork.org

Vulval and vaginal health

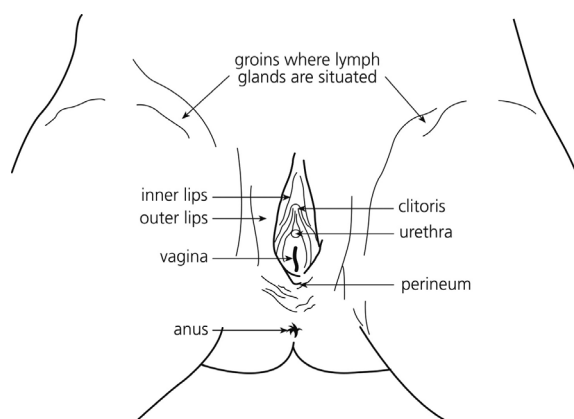
Many women experience hormonal changes, naturally or following treatment (radiotherapy, surgery, chemotherapy or medication), which affect how the vagina works causing thinning of the vaginal wall and loss of lubrication. Specialist advice will be provided alongside treatments that are more likely to affect the genital area, e.g. internal radiotherapy or surgery to the vulva.

You may experience a loss of interest in sex and/or less sexual feelings or pleasure or even feeling numb. You may also have discomfort or pain and this can lead to avoiding intimacy or sexual activity. Some women can experience discomfort in their genital area when sitting or walking.

Sometimes women notice they begin to avoid that area of the body. Feelings of shame, anger and loss may mean you do not look or touch, and avoid thoroughly washing and moisturising. This can make matters worse and may delay you adjusting to the changes in your body.

Vulval and vaginal care helpful hints and tips

It is helpful to know the different parts of your own genital area, as this can be useful to identify and describe pain or other changes to your healthcare professional. You may want to use a mirror to look at yourself, even though this can be daunting if there have been significant changes as result of treatment. Taking things slowly at your own pace is helpful.



Taking regular care of your vagina and vulval area can help to reduce pain, maintain comfort and promote sexual wellbeing. To maintain good vulval and vaginal health, it is recommended that you commence a regime of washing and moisturising regularly before, during and after treatment. Normal soap or perfumed products dry the vulval skin and are not recommended. You should make your health professional aware of any allergies you may have.

Washing

Using your hands rather than a face cloth is gentler and helps you to be more aware of this part of your body. When drying the area, pat yourself dry rather than rubbing to avoid irritation. We recommend washing daily with a soap substitute such as:

- Aqueous cream*
- Dermol lotion*
- Hydromol emollient*
- Coconut wash

Aqueous cream needs to be rinsed off to avoid skin thinning. Coconut wash is liked by many and we suggest a pure product.

**Products are available on prescription from your GP*

Moisturisers

Moisturising the vulval area is important for comfort and ensuring the skin is in good health which will help prevent problems in the future. We recommend moisturising daily. Products that can be used:

- Diprobase cream
- E45 Cream
- Dermol cream*
- Hydromol ointment*

Vaginal moisturisers

These are used inside the vagina to replace the lost natural lubrication and should be inserted into the vagina regularly throughout the week following the advice of your healthcare professional. There are several vaginal moisturisers, available on prescription from your GP, that are non-hormone based. You may want to try several to identify what suits you best:

- Feminesse*
- Hyalofemme*
- Sylk* (avoid if kiwi fruit allergy)
- YES vaginal moisturiser*

Lubricants

Lubricants are used for sexual activity to reduce friction, increase comfort and pleasure. There are 4 different types of lubricants we advise. You may want to try several to identify what suits you best:

- water based or silicone based, which are safe to use with condoms
- oil based which are not safe to use with condoms
- Sylk* (avoid if kiwi fruit allergy)

We recommend the double-glide technique. This is when one person uses water based and one person uses oil based lubricants for maximum benefit.

We do not recommend you use KY jelly or Aquagel as it dries up too quickly and increases friction.

Also lubricants in the Durex range are readily available and are popular, but avoid the flavoured lubricants or hot and cold types as they can be irritants.

Further support

There are many other sources of information that may be helpful to you and your healthcare professional can you find what is most relevant to you.

Macmillan Cancer Support offer advice and support on all aspects of cancer, including relationships and sex.

Freephone **0808 808 0000** 7days a week, 8:00am – 8:00pm or visit www.macmillan.org.uk

If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

The Christie is committed to producing high quality, evidence based information for patients. Our patient information adheres to the principles and quality statements of the Information Standard. If you would like to have details about the sources used please contact patient.information@christie.nhs.uk

For information and advice visit the cancer information centres at Withington, Oldham or Salford. Opening times can vary, please check before making a special journey.



Contact The Christie Hotline for
urgent support and specialist advice
The Christie Hotline: 0161 446 3658
Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week