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Sexual Function in Adult Childhood Cancer Survivors

September is Childhood Cancer Awareness Month and with this in mind, we'd like to talk a bit about the late effects of cancer treatment that can cause sexual problems for patients when they are adults.

It may seem premature to think about sexuality in adulthood when children are undergoing cancer treatment. After all, the most important goal is to manage the cancer.

However, cancer treatment can have repercussions later in life. Late effects are medical issues that occur months, years, or even decades after treatment.

For example, boys who have had radiation therapy to the brain, abdomen, or testes may become infertile. In addition their bodies may not be able to produce enough testosterone, an important hormone for male development and sexual function.

Girls may be faced with infertility and premature menopause, as chemotherapy and radiation can damage the ovaries, which release eggs and produce the hormone estrogen. Lower levels of estrogen can affect the health of the vagina. Estrogen helps lubricate the vagina to prepare it for sex. Women with low levels of estrogen may have vaginal dryness which can lead to painful intercourse.

For both boys and girls, radiation therapy to the head can affect glands involved with hormone production and regulation.

Even if treatment doesn't specifically target sex and reproductive organs, it can still interfere with sexual function. The emotional consequences of cancer treatment can be powerful and many survivors cope with depression and anxiety. Fears about the cancer coming back – or developing another type of cancer later on – are not uncommon.

How Common Are Sexual Issues?

Recent studies have shed some light on how common sexual issues are for childhood cancer survivors.

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Last year, a study by American researchers in *The Journal of Sexual Medicine* surveyed 291 childhood cancer survivors about their sexual health. Twenty-nine percent of them had at least two symptoms of sexual dysfunction, with women being twice as likely to have issues.

Among the whole group, almost 30% of the participants said they were not interested in sex. About 24% said they had trouble relaxing and enjoying sex. Sexual arousal was difficult for about 23% of the participants.

Nineteen percent of the men experienced erection problems. Orgasm difficulties occurred in 29% of the women.

The researchers suggested that problems were more common for women because sex and relationships caused them more stress and anxiety.

Research for Women

Last month, a study published in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* reported on the experiences of female childhood cancer survivors. Researchers compared a group of 2,178 survivors with 408 female siblings. The women completed a 122-item questionnaire designed to assess sexual health.

The scientists discovered that female childhood cancer survivors were more likely to experience poorer sexual function when compared to their sisters who had not had cancer.

Lack of sexual interest and desire, problems with arousal, and sexual dissatisfaction were the most common issues. Women who had experienced ovarian failure had more problems than those who hadn't.

Over a quarter of the survivors had not been sexually active in the previous month, compared to 17% of their sisters. Seven percent of the survivors said they had never been sexually active.

Help For Survivors

If you're experiencing a sexual issue and think it might be related to childhood cancer, please talk to your doctor. Treatments are available and your healthcare provider can help you decide which is best for you.

If you're in a relationship, be open with your partner about your feelings and concerns. Chances are, he or she will be supportive and work with you on these issues so that you can build a stronger relationship.

Resources

American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) (Cancer.net)

“Late Effects of Childhood Cancer”

(July 2013)

<http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/children/late-effects-childhood-cancer>

The ASCO Post

Stenger, Matthew

“Poorer Psychosexual Functioning in Adult Female Survivors of Childhood Cancer”

(August 21, 2014)

<http://www.ascopost.com/ViewNews.aspx?nid=17526>

Journal of Clinical Oncology

Ford, Jennifer S., et al.

“Psychosexual Functioning Among Adult Female Survivors of Childhood Cancer: A Report From the Childhood Cancer Survivor Study”

(Abstract. Published online before print: August 11, 2014)

<http://jco.ascopubs.org/content/early/2014/08/11/JCO.2013.54.1086.abstract>

The Journal of Sexual Medicine

Bober, Sharon L., PhD, et al.

“Sexual Function in Childhood Cancer Survivors: A Report from Project REACH”

(Full-text. First published online: May 16, 2013)

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jsm.12193/full>