

## **Sex After Breast Cancer**

*By Michael Castleman*

The bad news is that breast cancer is a fairly common illness, and it can wreak havoc with a woman's sexuality and the love life of the relationship she's involved in.

The good news is that with a little effort, within several months after treatment, couples in loving, supportive relationships usually adjust and enjoy sex as much as they did before the diagnosis—sometimes more.

### **One Woman in Nine**

Breast cancer is the most frequently diagnosed malignancy in women. In 2008, some 184,000 American women were diagnosed and 41,000 died of the disease. Women's lifetime risk of breast cancer, that is the chance that a woman will get diagnosed sometime from age 18 to 85, is approximately one in nine, or 11 percent.

Compared with cardiovascular disease (heart disease and stroke), breast cancer kills far fewer women (505,000 vs. 41,000 annually). Nonetheless, breast cancer is generally regarded as the disease women fear most, in part because it strikes so many women in their thirties and forties, and in part because it strikes a part of the body profoundly connected to women's feelings of femininity, motherhood, and sexuality.

### **Sexually, Breast Cancer is Special**

Any cancer can affect sexuality because of the emotional shock of the diagnosis. In addition, the trauma and side effects of surgery, radiation, and/or chemotherapy often include: severe fatigue, depressed mood, hair loss, and nausea, all of which wreak havoc with sexual desire and response.

But sex after breast cancer is often particularly problematic because breasts are so intimately connected to women's—and men's—experience of sexual attractiveness

and sexual play. Many women lose a breast to the disease (mastectomy), which can have a profound impact on lovemaking. And even those who have just the tumor removed and keep their breast (lumpectomy) wind up with a scar and possibly a breast whose shape has been altered by the surgery.

For years, cancer counselors and sex counselors have advised breast cancer survivors and their lovers that within a year after treatment most survivors return to their previous sexual functioning. But this was merely impressionistic advice.

### **Findings of the Major Study on Sex After Breast Cancer**

Fortunately, researchers at UCLA, Georgetown University, and the University of Southern California teamed up on a sexuality survey of 863 breast cancer survivors. Participants were a statistical snapshot of the female U.S. population: racially diverse, mostly married and employed (some retired), with an income range from low to high, and sexually active at diagnosis and at the time of the survey. About half had lumpectomies, and half mastectomies, with about one-third of the women who lost breasts having had reconstructions. About half received radiation (standard with lumpectomy), and about one-third had chemotherapy. Participants were surveyed an average of three years after their diagnosis, meaning two to 2.5 years after the end of their treatment.

Overall, at the time of the survey, the women's feelings about their libido, responsiveness, orgasm, and overall sexual satisfaction hardly differed at all from a control group of women who had not had breast cancer.

However, some women noted significant cancer-related sexuality changes. The most frequent area of change involved comfort touching—or having a lover touch—the affected breast area. Before diagnosis, 19 percent said this caused discomfort. At the time of the survey, the figure was 32 percent. But about 15 percent said they felt better about having the affected breast or chest area touched.

Another frequent area of change involved discomfort undressing in front of a lover, that is, baring the affected breast—12 percent said they felt uncomfortable before diagnosis vs. 25 percent at the time of the survey. Two percent said they felt more comfortable.

Having sex in the nude was uncomfortable for 5 percent prior to diagnosis, and 15 percent in the survey. One percent said it was more comfortable.

Another aspect of sexuality affected by breast cancer included loss of lubrication, and greater pain associated with intercourse (from loss of lubrication). Chemotherapy typically induces chemical menopause, and menopause is strongly associated with decreased lubrication.

### **Big Link to Relationship Satisfaction**

However, the breast cancer survivors most likely to report these problems, and less sex, and less sexual satisfaction were the ones who also reported the least overall relationship satisfaction. Among women who rated their relationships satisfying, far fewer complained about these discomforts, or less sex, or loss of sexual satisfaction.

The researchers concluded that for women in enjoyable, loving, supportive relationships, breast cancer has little lasting impact on sexuality, though it may have some.

They also concluded that the most frequent problem—sudden menopause with loss of vaginal lubrication—could be easily corrected with commercial lubricants. They noted that fewer than one-third of women in the total population use sexual lubricants routinely, and that after breast cancer, doctors, counselors, and friends should encourage it, or encourage couples to explore sex without intercourse—mutual hand massage, oral sex, and sex toys.

### **Help**

For individualized help dealing with sex after breast cancer, consult a sex therapist. To find one near you, visit [aasect.org](http://aasect.org), the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists, or [sstarnet.org](http://sstarnet.org), the Society for Sex Therapy and Research. —Michael Castleman

### **Reference:**

Meyerowitz BE et al. “Sexuality Following Breast Cancer,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* (1999) 25:237.