

WE ARE
MACMILLAN.
CANCER SUPPORT

A practical guide to living with and after cancer

SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS

Support for young people affected by cancer



About this booklet

This booklet is about cancer, sex and relationships. It is for teenagers and young people who are having or have had cancer treatment. It may also help carers, family members and friends.

The booklet explains how cancer and cancer treatment may affect your relationships and sex life. It also gives information about coping with any changes and how to get more support.

We hope it helps you deal with some of the questions or feelings you may have. We cannot give advice about the best treatment for you. You should talk to your doctor, who knows your medical history.

This booklet does not have detailed information about fertility. We have another booklet about this called **Fertility – support for young people affected by cancer**.

For more information

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm, or visit **macmillan.org.uk**

If you would prefer to speak to us in another language, interpreters are available. Please tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

If you are deaf or hard of hearing, call us using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app.

We have some information in different languages and formats, including audio, eBooks, easy read, Braille, large print and translations. To order these, visit [macmillan.org.uk/otherformats](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/otherformats) or call **0808 808 00 00**.

How to use this booklet

The booklet is split into sections to help you find what you need. You don't have to read it from start to finish. You can use the contents list opposite to help you.

It is fine to skip parts of the booklet. You can always come back to them when you feel ready.

Quotes

In this booklet we have included quotes from teenagers and young people. These quotes are from people who have had cancer, which you may find helpful. They have chosen to share their stories with us. Some names have been changed.

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How cancer can affect sex and relationships

Most people have questions about relationships and sex at some point during or after cancer treatment. This is whether you are in a relationship or are single, or if you have had sex or not. You may have questions because cancer can change:

- your body
- your confidence
- how you feel about sex
- how you think other people feel about you.

These things are all very personal and can be difficult to talk about. You may also have a lot of other things to cope with and think about. Cancer can affect areas of your life such as work, study or where you live. When these things change, your social life and relationships may have to adjust too.

It is important to get all the information and support you need. If you want to talk to someone but you are not sure where to start, have a look at our information on talking about sex and relationships on pages 36 to 41 and who else can help on pages 45 to 47.

'Keeping things inside, and feeling like you are the only one, is really hard. Whether you talk to friends, family, a counsellor, or a charity, do it because it really does help.'

Ashley

If you are in a relationship

If you are in a relationship, cancer can make things complicated. There is no right way to deal with cancer. Some couples find their relationship grows stronger, while others have a tough time making it work. Every relationship is different.

Making time for each other

Cancer can take up a lot of your time. You may have a lot of appointments and hospital visits. You might have to stay in hospital or travel some distance to have treatment. This can mean spending less time with your partner than you are used to. You may not be able to do as many things together if you are in hospital or recovering from treatment.

Try to make the most of the times that you are together. It's great to see friends and family, but sometimes you might choose to do something as a couple.

It is also important to try not to worry about spending some time apart. It can help build a healthy and strong relationship. If there is no way to see each other face to face, try to keep in touch using video or phone calls, texts or social media.

Changes in your relationship

It can sometimes feel like the people closest to you become distant after a cancer diagnosis, including your partner. There may be lots of reasons for this:

- Many people don't know much about cancer or cancer treatment. They may not understand what you are going through or how you feel.
- Some people find it difficult to cope with feeling upset or scared. They may avoid talking about what is happening, or even avoid spending time with you.
- If you have to stop working or studying during your cancer treatment, you may feel you have less in common with your partner. Or your relationship might change because your parents or other people are suddenly more involved in your life. Your partner may not know how they fit in and what their role is.

Feeling close and comfortable in your relationship is important. But your feelings may change over time. Whatever you are feeling, keep talking and listening to each other. You could start by telling each other about your day or how you are feeling.

'My boyfriend was at the hospital every day after he finished school. He stayed by my side through thick and thin and we are now engaged.'

Kirsty

What about sex?

If you are having sex, you may find you are less interested during cancer treatment. Side effects can sometimes make sex physically difficult. But you may just not feel relaxed enough for sex.

Even without cancer, people can find their interest in sex changes over time for lots of reasons. This is common and often it is not a problem. But if one person in a relationship is more interested in sex than the other, it can be difficult.

It is helpful to talk about how you both feel and what you are thinking. Try to be clear and open about what you want. Remember, there should never be any pressure to have sex if you don't want to.

We have more information about coping with sexual problems caused by cancer on pages 23 to 27. Your healthcare team can help too. See pages 40 to 41 for more information.

If you do have sex, make sure you use contraception that protects you and your partner, and that prevents pregnancy. You can find out more in our information about starting cancer treatment on pages 20 to 21.

If a relationship ends

Sometimes relationships don't last. Going through a break up can be difficult for anyone. But it may seem especially hard when you are coping with cancer too. Whether you ended the relationship or not, it is normal to feel some strong emotions.

Things will get better with time. Until then, these tips might help:

- It is okay to be sad, angry or even relieved that the relationship is over. Give yourself time and be honest about what you are feeling.
- Try to make time for things you enjoy and that make you feel good about yourself.
- Focus on something that interests you, like a hobby. Or try something new.
- Spend some time with friends.

'I had a boyfriend, but we split up when I was having chemotherapy. He tried to support me, but he wasn't ready for that and couldn't understand things.'

Billy

If you are starting a new relationship

Starting a new relationship can be exciting, but sometimes a bit scary too. It can be fun getting to know someone and letting them get to know you. But you might find it difficult to know how to talk about cancer.

If you are still having cancer treatment, a new partner may not understand what you are going through. If you meet someone after you have finished cancer treatment, they may not even know you had cancer. Perhaps you don't really want to talk about it or feel it's too soon to tell them. If the cancer has affected your body, sex life or fertility, you may be worried about how a new partner will react.

It is your decision how, when and what you tell a new partner. Some people want to be honest about their experiences from the start of a relationship. Others prefer to wait. It can help to talk to someone else before deciding what to do. You might choose to talk to a family member, friend or professional. Or you could contact one of the organisations on pages 55 to 57 for support. We have more information about talking about sex and relationships on pages 36 to 41 that may help.

If you decide it is the right time to talk to your partner, think about what you want them to understand. For example, what are the most important things for you? Or, what are the things that worry you?

Relationships are often made stronger by good communication and honesty. Here are some tips:

- Think about how much you want to share. You may only want to tell your partner the type of cancer or some things about your treatment.
- Introduce the subject gently. You could start with something like: 'This is going to be difficult, but I need to tell you something.'
- Try to give small amounts of information. Your partner may not be able to take everything in at one time.
- When you start talking, remember to listen too. Your partner might have different questions or worries that they want to talk about.



If you are not in a relationship

You don't need to be in a relationship to have questions about how cancer can affect your sex life or love life. But you may worry that people won't expect you to think about it because you are single. Your healthcare team are there to answer any questions you have. Try not to be embarrassed and ask them about anything you are worried about. We have more information about talking to your healthcare team on pages 40 to 41.

Choosing to be single

There are some great things about being in a relationship. But there are also good reasons why people decide to be single. If you are feeling nervous about starting a relationship, haven't met someone or think it's not the right time, then there is no rush.

Perhaps there are other areas of your life that you want to focus on. You might want to get involved in activities that you enjoy and that make you feel good about yourself. Or take some time to build up your confidence in other ways. Some people choose to spend time making friends and building up their social life before starting a relationship.

When you are ready, you could read more about starting a new relationship on pages 11 to 12.

If you are not sure who you like yet

Finding out who you are, and what you like sexually, is part of life. Cancer doesn't change that. Some people have a clear sense of their gender and who they find attractive. Others need time to work it out.

It's common to have questions about gender or sexuality, but this can also be stressful. You may feel like it is another worry when you are already coping with a lot. You may worry how people will react if you tell them you are not sure about these things.

If you find it difficult to talk to people you know, some organisations offer support about gender or sexuality. You can find contact details on pages 45 to 47.

What about sex?

It's natural to worry about what sex will be like after cancer treatment, whether you have had sex before or not. Cancer and treatment can make your body look, feel or work differently. This can be hard to deal with. Some changes may be short term, such as hair loss. But some may be permanent, for example losing a limb.

It can take a while to adjust to any changes to your body. If your appearance has changed, you may wonder if other people find you attractive. If your feelings or confidence are stopping you from having sex, it can help to talk about it. Sometimes practical advice about coping with a change makes a difference. You may choose to talk to a friend or family member (see pages 37 to 38), someone from your healthcare team (see pages 40 to 41), or get in touch with one of the organisations on pages 45 to 47.

Most people are able to have sex after cancer treatment, but for some people sex is more complicated. We have more about coping with sexual problems caused by cancer in our information on side effects (see pages 23 to 27).





HAVING CANCER TREATMENT

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Starting cancer treatment

Talking to your medical team

When you are diagnosed with cancer, it can feel like everything happens very quickly. Your cancer doctor or nurse may give you lots of information about cancer and treatments, and you may have decisions to make.

It is important that you get all the facts and support you need to make these decisions. This may include getting information about fertility and sex. You should also take time to think about what you want to do.

Cancer and fertility

Cancer and cancer treatments can affect your fertility (your ability to have children). Your cancer doctor or nurse will talk to you about this before your treatment starts. If cancer treatment is likely to affect your fertility, you may be able to have treatment to keep your fertility (fertility preservation) first.

For men and boys, fertility preservation usually means collecting and storing samples of your sperm. For women and girls, it can mean collecting and storing your eggs or tissue from one of your ovaries. Or, your collected eggs can be fertilised with sperm and any embryos that develop are stored.

You don't have to be in a relationship or know whether you want to be a parent to have fertility preservation. It just gives you options in the future. Your fertility may be something you haven't thought about much before. You may come to terms with the situation quickly and feel that dealing with the cancer is more important. Or you may find that you don't process what has happened until the treatment is over.

'I had to have my sperm frozen, which is something you'd never think about as a young guy. I had no idea whether I might want kids.'

Amrik

We have more information about cancer and fertility in our booklet **Fertility – support for young people affected by cancer** that you may find helpful. Visit [be.macmillan.org.uk](https://www.be.macmillan.org.uk) or call us on **0808 808 00 00** to order a free copy.

Safe sex during treatment

If you have sex during cancer treatment, it is important to protect yourself and your partner and to prevent a pregnancy. If you have any questions about this, ask your doctor or nurse for advice.

Preventing pregnancy

Some cancer treatments can be harmful to an unborn baby. Whatever your gender, you should use contraception to prevent a pregnancy during your treatment and for a time after. Even if your cancer treatment is likely to damage your fertility, you may still be able to get pregnant or get someone pregnant.

There are many different types of contraception. The best ones to use during cancer treatment are a condom or cap (diaphragm). Some hormonal contraceptives (such as the pill, patch, injection or implants) may be less effective during cancer treatment. This is because of:

- the drugs you are taking
- side effects you may have, such as diarrhoea and vomiting.

Ask your doctor or nurse if you have any questions about contraception.

Protecting your partner

Small amounts of chemotherapy, or other drugs, can get into your body fluids. That includes fluid made in the vagina and the fluid that contains sperm. To protect your partner, your cancer doctor may advise that for a few days after treatment you:

- use a condom (or a latex barrier, such as a dental dam) for oral sex
- use a condom for vaginal or anal sex.

Your cancer doctor or nurse will be able to give you more information about your treatment.

Protecting yourself

Using condoms and dental dams also helps protect you from sexually transmitted infections (STIs). This is important even if you are not having cancer treatment. But it is even more important if your cancer treatment affects how your body fights infections.

If you have cuts or sores in your mouth, there is a risk these could become infected. It is best not to give your partner oral sex until they heal.

For anal sex, use a condom and some water or silicon-based lubricant. The inside of the anus does not make fluid like the vagina does. This means it is easier to cause bleeding or infection during anal sex. Don't use the same condom to have vaginal sex. It can spread germs to the vagina and cause infections.

When your platelets are low, you have a higher risk of bleeding. If you notice any bleeding after sex, tell your doctor. If there is a lot of blood or it doesn't stop, contact your hospital straight away.

After high-dose chemotherapy or a stem cell transplant, your doctor may advise you not to have close physical contact with anyone for a while. This is because even an infection might be dangerous for you. Your doctor can give you more information about this.



Side effects and sex

Side effects of cancer treatment

Most people have some side effects during cancer treatment. Your cancer doctor or nurse will explain what to expect. Some side effects can change:

- how you feel about your body
- how you feel about sex
- how your body works during sex.

Side effects often get better after treatment. But some people find they have sexual problems for a longer time after treatment ends. If you find a side effect difficult to cope with, try not to ignore it. You may feel embarrassed talking about it, but your healthcare team can help.

You may have some other questions about sex and side effects that we don't cover here. You can always talk to your cancer doctor or nurse about these. See pages 40 to 41 for more information about talking to your healthcare team.

Tiredness

At times during and after treatment, you might have less energy, need more rest or get tired more easily. When you are tired, you may be less interested in sex or even in spending time with other people.

It might help to just spend time as a couple being close and intimate without having sex. Sometimes this leads on to sex. But it is also a way to build trust and confidence together. If you want to have sex, choose a comfortable, relaxed position. Don't put pressure on yourself to make it last a long time or to orgasm (come).

We have more information about coping with tiredness in our booklet **Coping with fatigue**.

Feeling sick

Some cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and some types of radiotherapy, are more likely to cause sickness and nausea. Your doctor will give you drugs to prevent sickness. Tell your doctor or nurse if you still feel sick so they can help.

Your treatment may only make you feel sick at certain times. For example, chemotherapy is most likely to make you feel sick in the hours or days after you have it. If you can work out a pattern, try to spend time with your partner when you feel well.

We have more information about coping with sickness in our booklet **Side effects of cancer treatment**, which you may find helpful.

Pain

Any type of pain can make you less interested in sex. You might not want to have sex because you feel uncomfortable. Or you might be scared that sex will be painful.

Your partner may not want to have sex if they are worried about hurting you. Try to find a position that feels comfortable for you both.

You can also ask your doctor or nurse for advice about painkillers and ways to reduce the pain.

Problems with erections

Some people find they have problems getting an erection during cancer treatment. This may be because you are feeling tired or sick. But sometimes cancer treatment causes other physical changes that make it difficult to get an erection. We have listed some of these changes on the next page.

Low testosterone

Some cancer treatments can affect male testosterone hormone levels. Hormones are chemicals in the body that help control how the body works. Low levels of testosterone can make it difficult to get an erection, and can sometimes make you less interested in having sex. It can also cause other problems such as thinning of the bones (osteoporosis), tiredness and a low mood.

If your testosterone levels don't recover, you can take testosterone replacement therapy (TRT). You usually take this as injections or as a gel or patch on your skin. TRT can improve sex drive, erections, mood and tiredness. It also helps prevent long-term problems, such as thinning of the bones (osteoporosis).

Damage to the nerves and blood supply

Sometimes cancer, or cancer treatment to the pelvic area, can damage the nerves and blood supply to the penis and testicles. Your pelvic area is the area between your hips and below your belly button. Damage to this area can cause problems with getting an erection or how you ejaculate.

There are treatments that may help if you are having erection problems, but it can depend on exactly what is causing the problem. It is always best to ask someone from your healthcare team for expert advice. You can read more about talking to your healthcare team on pages 40 to 41.

We have more information for men about coping with sexual problems in our booklet **Cancer and your sex life – information for men**. Visit [be.macmillan.org.uk](https://www.be.macmillan.org.uk) or call us on **0808 808 00 00** to order a free copy.

Early menopause

Some cancer treatments can affect female hormone levels. These help control periods, fertility (being able to get pregnant and give birth) and how your body works during sex.

These hormone levels change naturally during the menopause (usually in a woman's mid-40s to mid-50s). When this happens, periods gradually stop and you can't get pregnant anymore. Some women also have symptoms such as:

- hot flushes and sweats
- vaginal dryness
- mood changes
- poor concentration
- less interest in sex.

If cancer treatment affects your hormone levels, you might have some of these symptoms. They may improve as your hormone levels recover after treatment.

If your hormone levels don't recover, you will have an early menopause. This is also called premature ovarian insufficiency (POI). You won't be able to get pregnant and you may continue to have menopausal symptoms.

Your doctor or nurse can talk to you about treatments that can help with these symptoms. They may also talk to you about treatment to replace the hormones that are at a low level. This also helps prevent long-term problems, such as thinning of the bones (osteoporosis) or heart disease.

It can be hard coping with this when you are already coping with cancer. As well as the symptoms, you may be dealing with some difficult feelings about losing your fertility.

If you want to talk, you can call the Macmillan Support line on **0808 808 00 00**. There are also organisations that give advice and support about early menopause (see pages 55 to 57).

Vaginal dryness

During sex, the vagina usually produces some natural fluid. Without this, sex can sometimes feel uncomfortable or painful. Vaginal dryness can happen during cancer treatment because you are tired, stressed or less interested in sex. It may also happen if your treatment affects your hormone levels.

If you want to have sex, a lubricant may help with dryness and make sex more comfortable. Lubricant is a gel or liquid that you use inside the vagina. Your GP can prescribe a lubricant or you can buy it from a pharmacy or other shop, or online.

Vaginal changes

Cancer of the cervix or vagina may be treated with surgery or radiotherapy. Sometimes these treatments cause scarring or nerve damage. They can also make the vagina narrower and less stretchy. If this happens, you might find sex less comfortable, or find it harder to orgasm (come).

There are treatments that may help if you are having sexual problems, but it can depend on what is causing the problem. It's always best to ask someone from your healthcare team for advice. See pages 40 to 41 for more about talking to your healthcare team.

We have more information for women about coping with sexual problems in our booklet **Cancer and your sex life – information for women**.



AFTER CANCER TREATMENT

Life after treatment

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Life after treatment

Although you may feel ready to get on with life after treatment, it's also common to have mixed feelings. You may have days when you feel anxious or less positive about the future. It can take time to recover physically and emotionally, and to work out what happens next. You have been through a lot, so it is completely normal to feel this way.

If your body is different

Cancer and cancer treatment can change your appearance or how you feel about your body. These changes can be short-term or long-term. Some changes are more obvious, such as scars or weight changes. Others, such as changes to fertility or reduced sex drive, can't be seen but can also have a big effect on you.

'Image for me is incredibly important and I have struggled with how much my appearance has changed with cancer.'

Jenna

If you find it difficult to cope with changes to your body, give yourself time to adjust and be kind to yourself. You may find it gets easier. But if something about your appearance or body is stopping you from having relationships or sex, you may want more advice and support (see pages 45 to 47).

'When my hair started to come out, I was embarrassed about what people would think, especially my boyfriend. But he reassured me that it was only hair and that I was still beautiful.'

Kirsty

Building your confidence can have a positive effect. Try to think of things that make you feel good about yourself. Set yourself goals that you know you can meet. You can work towards larger goals by breaking them into smaller steps. For example, if you're worried about going out in public, you could start by having some close friends round to watch a film. If you feel comfortable with that, next time you could do something at someone else's house. Eventually, you might feel confident enough to go out somewhere quiet for a short time with friends.

'I didn't like how I looked and I didn't like people looking at me. It takes away your confidence.'

Jamie

We have more information about coping with body changes in our booklet **Body image and cancer**. To order a copy, call us on **0808 808 00 00** or visit **be.macmillan.org.uk**

If sex is difficult

Physical and emotional changes after cancer treatment can affect your confidence or your ability to have sex. This could affect your relationship, or make you worried about starting a new relationship. Some changes can be long-term. Some only happen months or years after treatment.

If you find sex is difficult or painful, it's important to get the right support and information. There are often ways to improve your sex life. It can be embarrassing to talk about it, but your healthcare team understand the issues and can help you. See pages 40 to 41 for more information about talking to your healthcare team.

You can find out more about coping with sexual problems in our information about sexuality and cancer for men and for women. Visit be.macmillan.org.uk or call us on **0808 808 00 00** to order our booklets **Sexuality and cancer – information for men** and **Sexuality and cancer – information for women**.

What about starting a family?

If your fertility is affected after cancer treatment, you may be able to have treatment to help you start a family. Our booklet **Fertility – support for young people affected by cancer** explains more about this.

The right time to try for a baby depends on when you finished treatment and the type of cancer and treatment you had. Talk to your doctor for some advice.

They may advise that you wait for a time before trying for a baby. This gives your body time to recover.

For women

Some women have a risk of an earlier menopause because of their cancer treatment. If this is likely, talk to your doctor as soon as you can. You may be advised to try for a baby sooner to give you the best chance of getting pregnant.

Cancer treatment sometimes makes pregnancy more complicated. Some women may need extra support from their healthcare team during pregnancy if they have had:

- surgery or radiotherapy to the pelvic area (the area between the hips and below the belly button)
- cancer treatment that has affected the heart or kidneys.

Even if your cancer treatment was many years ago, let your healthcare team know so they can give you the right care during pregnancy.

Contraception

Even if there is a risk that cancer treatment has affected your fertility, you and a partner may still be able to get pregnant. If you are not ready to start a family, use contraception. We have more information about safe sex and cancer treatment on pages 20 to 21.



GETTING SUPPORT

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Talking about sex and relationships

Some people find it easy to talk about sex and relationships. Others feel embarrassed just thinking about it. It may not be easy, but talking about a problem can be the first step towards dealing with it.

Try to find someone that you trust and feel comfortable talking to. This could be a partner, family member, friend or a professional. You could talk face to face or on the phone. Or you may find it easier to send an email, letter or text.

It might help to think about:

- what you want to say and why
- how the other person might react
- how you may feel about their reaction.

It can help to let the other person know that you want to talk about something private. Some people may not know that cancer and cancer treatment can affect your sex life or fertility. They may not know what to say, or may have their own feelings to cope with. Even people who understand can find it difficult to talk about these issues.

Talking to a partner

If you are in a relationship, try to be honest about how you feel. If cancer or treatment has changed how you feel about your body or sex, let your partner know. This gives them the chance to understand and support you. You might also find they have questions to ask you. Try to listen to, and answer, each other's questions and concerns.

Talking to a friend

You may find it difficult to talk to your friends after being diagnosed with cancer. You may feel that even your closest friends don't understand what you are going through. It may help to explain to one or two friends what it's like for you.

Some people find it easier to talk to someone who has had cancer treatment. Some organisations run support groups or online groups (see page 57 for details). Or ask your healthcare team for information about groups in your area. If you are 16 or over, you can join our Online Community at **macmillan.org.uk/community**

Talking to family

All families are different. Some talk about relationships and sex openly, while others might not. There may be people in your family who you are used to sharing everything with. But it can sometimes be difficult to talk about certain things, especially if you find that they get upset.

Some families and communities have strong views about fertility and having fertility treatments. They may also have opinions about being straight, gay, bisexual or trans. This could make it more difficult to talk openly about relationships and sex with them – especially if they don't know that cancer and its treatment affect these things. You may find that people sometimes seem insensitive, but they may not realise the effect of what they are saying.

If you are worried about talking to your family, it may help to speak to someone from your healthcare team first. They may be able to give you advice and support. Sometimes they can help you prepare for a difficult conversation, or be with you when you talk to your family.



Talking to healthcare staff

Your healthcare team can give you information and support during and after cancer treatment. They are experts and will understand the issues you may have. If you have questions about sex or relationships, ask them. They will understand that these questions are important to you.

You may have questions that you don't want to ask in front of your family, partner or other people. Let your doctor or nurse know that you want to talk about something privately. They will arrange a time and place to do this. Or there may be someone in the team that you feel more comfortable with, and you can ask to talk to them.

If you finished cancer treatment some time ago, you can ask questions at your follow-up clinic appointments or talk to your GP. Remember, your healthcare team often talks to people about sex, feelings and how the body works. They will not be surprised or embarrassed.

What can you ask?

You can ask your healthcare team about anything. If something worries you, it has probably been a problem for someone else too. You might want to talk about your feelings and how you are coping. You may also have questions about how your body works now or about having sex.

You don't need to know all the right words about sex or your body. Just explain what is wrong in your own words and say how you feel about it. If someone uses words that you don't understand, ask them to explain. If the information or support doesn't help, ask again.

How can they help?

Your healthcare team may be able to give you information or support to cope with a problem. They may also know about other people who can help you (see pages 45 to 47). Sometimes they can arrange for you to see other professionals, for example a specialist doctor, counsellor or social worker. Or they may give you information about other organisations or groups that you can contact.

Will they tell anyone else?

Your healthcare team will usually keep anything you share with them private. That means they will not tell other people that you have spoken to them, or what you talked about, unless you want them to. This is even if you are under 16.

The only time they will tell someone else is if they think you have been harmed or are at risk of harm. This is rare, and they will try to tell you first if they are going to do this.

Sometimes a professional may ask your permission to talk to other professionals who are seeing you. For example, a counsellor may want to tell your doctor that they have seen you. But it is your decision whether you want this information to be shared.

More questions about cancer and sex

Can I pass cancer on by having sex?

No. Cancer cannot be passed on to a partner through sex.

Will having sex make cancer come back?

No. Having sex does not increase the chance of cancer coming back.

How long will my side effects last?

It depends on the cancer treatment you had and the type of side effect. Some side effects are short-term and get better gradually after you finish treatment. Others may last longer or sometimes become a long-term problem. Remember, it is possible to improve most side effects or make them easier to cope with. Your doctor or nurse can give you more advice and support.

Do my healthcare team need to know if I'm gay, bisexual or trans?

Your healthcare team want to support you and treat you in a way you feel comfortable with. There may be times when it helps them to know:

- whether you think of yourself as male or female (your gender)
- who you are attracted to (your sexuality).

But you don't have to talk to them about this if you don't want to – it won't change your cancer treatment.

If you want to talk, but not to people you know, you can still get support. You may find it easier to talk to someone from your healthcare team privately. Or you may want to talk to someone from one of the support organisations listed on pages 45 to 47.

Can I masturbate?

Yes. Masturbating can be a good way to relax. It can help you get to know your body during and after treatment, and to find out what feels good for you. It does not cause cancer or make cancer grow.

Should I have the HPV vaccination?

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is a very common virus linked to some types of cancer, including cancer of the cervix (cervical cancer) in women.

To help prevent cervical cancer, teenage girls are offered injections (vaccinations) that protect against two types of HPV. If you missed your HPV vaccination because of your cancer treatment, you may still be able to have it. But it may not work as well if cancer treatment has affected your immune system. Ask your cancer doctor for advice about the best time to have your injections.

Cervical cancer can also be prevented by regular screening tests. From the age of 25, women are usually sent an invitation to have these tests every few years.

We have more information about the HPV vaccine on our website. You can find information about cervical screening in our booklet **Understanding CIN (cervical intra-epithelial neoplasia)**. There is more information about cervical cancer in **Understanding cervical cancer**. To order free copies, call us on **0808 808 00 00** or visit **be.macmillan.org.uk**

If I have an early menopause, are there any treatments I can have to help with the effects?

Yes. You can have treatment and support to cope with any symptoms and the emotional effects of an early menopause. You can also have treatment to protect you from the long-term effects of the menopause, such as thinning of the bones (osteoporosis) and heart disease.

You may be offered:

- support from your GP or a specialist who treats women with early menopause
- treatment and advice to help you cope with symptoms
- hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or a type of hormonal contraceptive to prevent long-term effects.

Your doctor will explain the possible risks and benefits of any treatment to you. Some women can't take HRT safely because of the type of cancer they have. Your doctor will tell you whether this treatment is suitable for you.

Who else can help?

There are lots of ways to get support and information. But you may want to go to different places for different things. Your healthcare team (see pages 40 to 41) is always a good place to start. We have listed some ideas of who else can help over the next few pages.

Information about sex

Your local sexual health service can give you free and confidential information about:

- contraception
- sex and relationships
- sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- health and well-being.

Find your nearest service and more information:

- **England** – visit [nhs.uk/Livewell/Sexualhealthtopics](https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Sexualhealthtopics) or call the National Sexual Health Helpline on **0300 123 7123**.
- **Scotland** – visit [sexualhealthscotland.co.uk](https://www.sexualhealthscotland.co.uk) or call the Information Line on **0800 22 44 88**.
- **Wales** – visit www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/localservices or call the Sexual Health Helpline on **0800 567 123**.
- **Northern Ireland** – visit [sexualhealthni.info](https://www.sexualhealthni.info)

Information about relationships

There is lots of information about relationships online. Here are some websites aimed at teenagers and younger adults:

- Brook – [brook.org.uk/your-life](https://www.brook.org.uk/your-life)
- The Mix – [themix.org.uk](https://www.themix.org.uk)

Relate offers a range of online, face-to-face or phone services to help with relationships. Visit [relate.org.uk](https://www.relate.org.uk) or call **0300 100 1234**.

Support for teenagers or young people with cancer

Your healthcare team can give you information about any support groups in your area.

The organisations below offer different types of information, support and events for young people affected by cancer:

- Teenage Cancer Trust – [teenagecancertrust.org](https://www.teenagecancertrust.org)
- CLIC Sargent – [clicsargent.org.uk](https://www.clicsargent.org.uk)
- Children’s Cancer and Leukaemia Group – [cclg.org.uk](https://www.cclg.org.uk)

Support for lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans (LGBT) young people

This organisation offers support and information for young people who are LGBT:

- LGBT Youth Scotland – [lgbtyouth.org.uk](https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk)
- Switchboard LGBT+ – [switchboard.lgbt](https://www.switchboard.lgbt) or call **0300 330 0630**

Specialist professionals

There are lots of specialists who can help with different things. Your healthcare team may arrange for you to see a specialist if you need more support or advice. Below are some types of specialist and what they might offer.

Counsellors, therapists, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists

These specialists are all slightly different. But they can all help you understand and cope with your feelings and difficult situations. They do that by talking and listening to you. Sometimes they can give you advice or ideas to help you cope.

Fertility specialist

A healthcare professional who specialises in treatments to help people become pregnant.

Sex therapists

A sex therapist is usually a healthcare professional who is trained to support people with sexual problems. They can often help you work out whether a problem is physical or emotional, or both. They offer advice and exercises that may help.

Gynaecologist

A doctor who specialises in treating female reproductive system problems.

Urologist

A doctor who specialises in treating male or female urinary tract problems. They also treat male reproductive system problems.

Endocrinologist

A doctor who specialises in treating hormonal problems.



FURTHER INFORMATION

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About our information

We provide expert, up-to-date information about cancer. And all our information is free for everyone.

Order what you need

You may want to order more leaflets or booklets like this one. Visit [be.macmillan.org.uk](https://www.be.macmillan.org.uk) or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

We have booklets on different cancer types, treatments and side effects. We also have information about work, financial issues, diet, life after cancer and information for carers, family and friends.

Online information

All of our information is also available at [macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support)

There you'll also find videos featuring real-life stories from people affected by cancer, and information from health and social care professionals.

Other formats

We also provide information in different languages and formats, including:

- audiobooks
- Braille
- British Sign Language
- easy read booklets
- eBooks
- large print
- translations.

Find out more at [macmillan.org.uk/otherformats](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/otherformats)

If you'd like us to produce information in a different format for you, email us at cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Help us improve our information

We know that the people who use our information are the real experts. That's why we always involve them in our work. If you've been affected by cancer, you can help us improve our information.

We give you the chance to comment on a variety of information including booklets, leaflets and fact sheets.

If you'd like to hear more about becoming a reviewer, email reviewing@macmillan.org.uk You can get involved from home whenever you like, and we don't ask for any special skills – just an interest in our cancer information.



Other ways we can help you

At Macmillan, we know how a cancer diagnosis can affect everything, and we're here to support you.

Talk to us

If you or someone you know is affected by cancer, talking about how you feel and sharing your concerns can really help.

Macmillan Support Line

Our free, confidential phone line is open Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm. Our cancer support specialists can:

- help with any medical questions you have about cancer or your treatment
- help you access benefits and give you financial guidance
- be there to listen if you need someone to talk to
- tell you about services that can help you in your area.

Call us on **0808 808 00 00** or email us via our website, **[macmillan.org.uk/talktous](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/talktous)**

Information centres

Our information and support centres are based in hospitals, libraries and mobile centres. There, you can speak with someone face to face.

Visit one to get the information you need, or if you'd like a private chat, most centres have a room where you can speak with someone alone and in confidence.

Find your nearest centre at **[macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres)** or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Talk to others

No one knows more about the impact cancer can have on your life than those who have been through it themselves. That's why we help to bring people together in their communities and online.

Support groups

Whether you are someone living with cancer or a carer, we can help you find support in your local area, so you can speak face to face with people who understand. Find out about support groups in your area by calling us or by visiting [macmillan.org.uk/selfhelpandsupport](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/selfhelpandsupport)

Online Community

Thousands of people use our Online Community to make friends, blog about their experiences and join groups to meet other people going through the same things. You can access it any time of day or night. Share your experiences, ask questions, or just read through people's posts at [macmillan.org.uk/community](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/community)

The Macmillan healthcare team

Our nurses, doctors and other health and social care professionals give expert care and support to individuals and their families. Call us or ask your GP, consultant, district nurse or hospital ward sister if there are any Macmillan professionals near you.

'Everyone is so supportive on the Online Community, they know exactly what you're going through. It can be fun too. It's not all just chats about cancer.'

Mal

Help with money worries

Having cancer can bring extra costs such as hospital parking, travel fares and higher heating bills. If you've been affected in this way, we can help.

Financial guidance

Our financial team can give you guidance on mortgages, pensions, insurance, borrowing and savings.

Help accessing benefits

Our benefits advisers can offer advice and information on benefits, tax credits, grants and loans. They can help you work out what financial help you could be entitled to. They can also help you complete your forms and apply for benefits.

Macmillan Grants

Macmillan offers one-off payments to people with cancer. A grant can be for anything from heating bills or extra clothing to a much-needed break.

Call us on **0808 808 00 00**

to speak to a financial guide or benefits adviser, or to find out more about Macmillan Grants. We can also tell you about benefits advisers in your area. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/financialsupport](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/financialsupport) to find out more about how we can help you with your finances.

Help with work and cancer

Whether you're an employee, a carer, an employer or are self-employed, we can provide support and information to help you manage cancer at work. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/work](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/work)

Macmillan's My Organiser app

This free mobile app can help you manage your treatment, from appointment times and contact details, to reminders for when to take your medication. Search 'My Organiser' on the Apple App Store or Google Play on your phone.

Other useful organisations

There are lots of other organisations that can give you information or support.

Emotional support

British Infertility Counselling Association

Email info@bica.net

www.bica.net

Provides counselling and support to people affected by infertility. You can use the website to find a counsellor in your area.

Relate

Tel 0300 100 1234

Email Relate.Enquiries@relate.org.uk

www.relate.org.uk

Offers relationship counselling for individuals and couples, family counselling, mediation, children and young people's counselling and sex therapy. There are Relate centres across the UK, as well as local counsellors who provide face-to-face counselling and support. You can also get counselling on phone, email and Live Chat.

The Mix

Helpline 0808 808 4994
(daily from 11am to 11pm)

www.themix.org.uk

Provides free, confidential support for young people under 25 via their helpline, email, group chat and one to one chat.

Support for women who have an early menopause

The Daisy Network

Email info@daisynetwork.org.uk

daisynetwork.org.uk

www.daisynetwork.org.uk

A support group for women who have had an early menopause. The website gives information about early menopause and related issues. Paying members have access to extra support, information and online forums.

Information about sex and relationships

Brook

Email admin@brook.org.uk

www.brook.org.uk

Provides free and confidential sexual health and well-being services for under 25s through their website and at centres across the UK.

The National Sexual Healthline

Tel 0300 123 7123

(Mon to Fri, 9am to 8pm)

Provides sensitive and confidential advice about sexual health issues.

Support for lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans (LGBT) young people

LGBT Foundation

Tel 0345 330 3030

(Mon to Fri, 10am to 10pm, and Sat 10am to 6pm)

Email helpline@lgbt.foundation

www.lgbt.foundation

Provides a range of services to the LGBT community, including a helpline, email advice and counselling.

LGBT Youth Scotland

Email info@lgbtyouth.org.uk

www.lgbtyouth.org.uk

Support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans young people in the UK. Get in touch if you have a question, need advice or support, or are just looking for someone to talk to.

Switchboard LGBT+

Helpline 0300 330 0630

(Mon to Sun, 10am to 10pm)

Email chris@switchboard.lgbt

www.switchboard.lgbt

The helpline gives advice, information and referrals to people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and their families and friends.

Support for young people with cancer

Children's Cancer and Leukaemia Group (CCLG)

Tel 0116 252 5858

Email info@cclg.org.uk

www.cclg.org.uk

Provides information about childhood cancers, including information for teenagers and young adults who have had a childhood cancer.

CLIC Sargent

Tel 0300 330 0803

www.clicsargent.org.uk

Provides clinical, practical, financial and emotional support to children with cancer in the UK.

Teenage Cancer Trust

Tel 0207 612 0370

(Mon to Fri, 9am to 5.30pm)

Email [hello@](mailto:hello@teenagecancertrust.org)

teenagecancertrust.org

www.teenagecancertrust.org

A UK-wide charity devoted to improving the lives of teenagers and young adults with cancer. Runs a support network for young people with cancer, their friends and families.



You can search for more organisations on our website at macmillan.org.uk/organisations or call us on 0808 808 00 00.

Disclaimer

We make every effort to ensure that the information we provide is accurate and up to date but it should not be relied upon as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. So far as is permitted by law, Macmillan does not accept liability in relation to the use of any information contained in this publication, or third-party information or websites included or referred to in it. Some photos are of models.

Thanks

This booklet has been written, revised and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been approved by our Senior Medical Editor, Dr Gill Levitt, Honorary Paediatric Oncologist.

With thanks to: Julie Cain, Clinical Nurse Specialist for Teenagers and Young Adults with Cancer; Jamie Cargill, Teenage Trust Cancer Lead Nurse – Teenager and Young Adults; and Dr Victoria Grandage, Consultant Haematologist for the Children and Young People's Cancer Service, University College London Hospitals.

Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this edition, and those who shared their stories.

Sources

We've listed a sample of the sources used in the booklet below. If you would like further information about the sources we use, please contact us at **cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk**

Bober S L, et al. Sexual Function in Childhood Cancer Survivors: A Report from the Project REACH. *Journal of Sexual Medicine*. 2013. 10: 2084-2093.

Royal College of Physicians, The Royal College of Radiologists, Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. *The Effects of Cancer Treatment on Reproductive Functions: Guidance on Management*. Report of a Working Party. London: RCP, 2007.

Can you do something to help?

We hope this booklet has been useful to you. It's just one of our many publications that are available free to anyone affected by cancer. They're produced by our cancer information specialists who, along with our nurses, benefits advisers, campaigners and volunteers, are part of the Macmillan team. When people are facing the toughest fight of their lives, we're there to support them every step of the way.

We want to make sure no one has to go through cancer alone, so we need more people to help us. When the time is right for you, here are some ways in which you can become a part of our team.



Share your cancer experience

Support people living with cancer by telling your story, online, in the media or face to face.

Campaign for change

We need your help to make sure everyone gets the right support. Take an action, big or small, for better cancer care.

Help someone in your community

A lift to an appointment. Help with the shopping. Or just a cup of tea and a chat. Could you lend a hand?

Raise money

Whatever you like doing you can raise money to help. Take part in one of our events or create your own.

Give money

Big or small, every penny helps. To make a one-off donation see over.

Call us to find out more

0300 1000 200

macmillan.org.uk/getinvolved

Please fill in your personal details

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Other

Name

Surname

Address

Postcode

Phone

Email

Please accept my gift of £

(Please delete as appropriate)

I enclose a cheque / postal order /
Charity Voucher made payable to
Macmillan Cancer Support

OR debit my:

Visa / MasterCard / CAF Charity
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Don't let the taxman keep your money

Do you pay tax? If so, your gift will be worth 25% more to us – at no extra cost to you. All you have to do is tick the box below, and the tax office will give 25p for every pound you give.

- I am a UK tax payer and I would like Macmillan Cancer Support to treat all donations I make or have made to Macmillan Cancer Support in the last 4 years as Gift Aid donations, until I notify you otherwise.

I understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference. I understand Macmillan Cancer Support will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I give.

Macmillan Cancer Support and our trading companies would like to hold your details in order to contact you about our fundraising, campaigning and services for people affected by cancer. If you would prefer us not to use your details in this way please tick this box.

In order to carry out our work we may need to pass your details to agents or partners who act on our behalf.



If you'd rather donate online go to macmillan.org.uk/donate

Please cut out this form and return it in an envelope (no stamp required) to:
Supporter Donations, Macmillan Cancer Support, FREEPOST LON15851,
89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ

This booklet is about sex and relationships. It is for teenagers and young people who are having or have had cancer treatment.

It explains how cancer and cancer treatment may affect your relationships and sex life. It also gives information about coping with any changes and how to get more support.

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, Monday to Friday, 9am to 8pm, or visit **macmillan.org.uk**

Would you prefer to speak to us in another language? Interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use. Are you deaf or hard of hearing? Call us using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app.

Need information in different languages or formats? We produce information in audio, eBooks, easy read, Braille, large print and translations. To order these visit **macmillan.org.uk/otherformats** or call our support line.

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