

# Everything you wanted to know about Sexual Health & Cancer but were afraid to ask!

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# “No one really talks about it...”

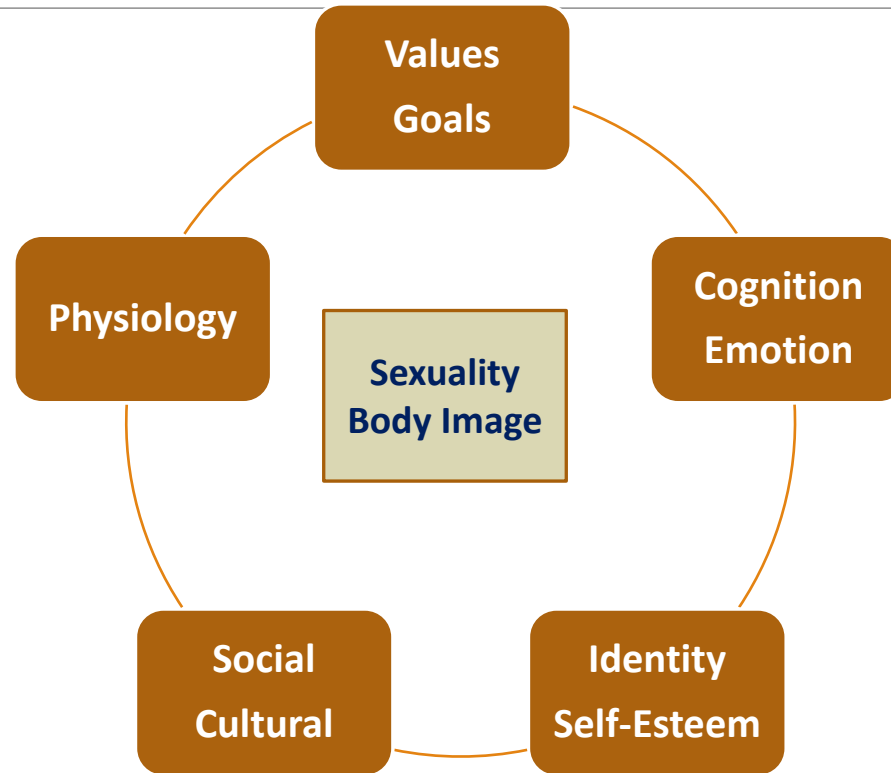
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- Culture is saturated with sex but lack of frank conversation about real challenges
- Confusion about who is responsible for initiating conversation
- Assumptions / misinformation / anxiety
- Clinicians often aren't sure what to say when a patient endorses a problem (pandora's box)

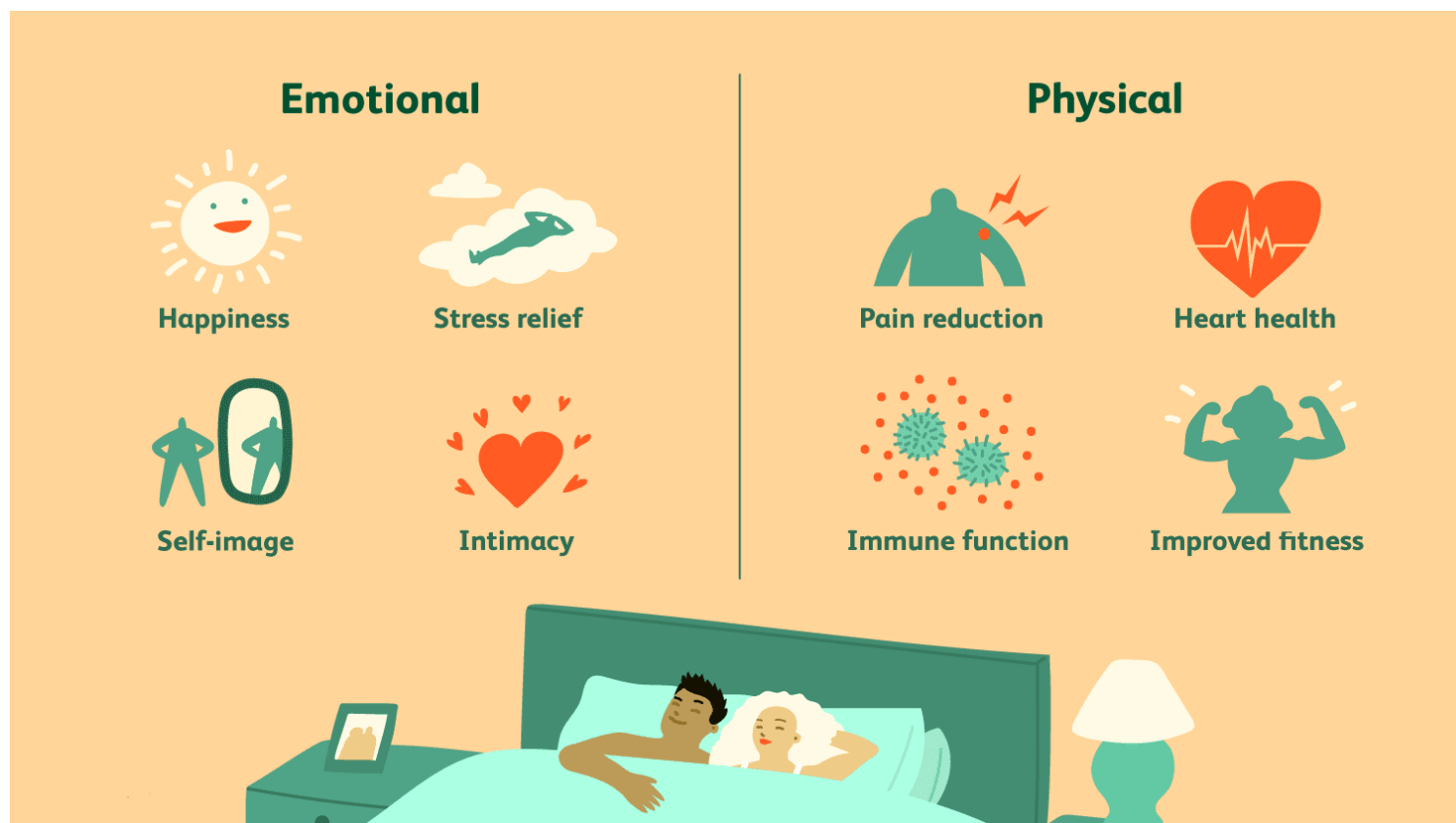
# Sexual Health: What is it?

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*World Health Organization (WHO) Defining Sexual Health: Report of a Technical Consultation on Sexual Health (2006)*

# Sexual Health and Well-Being



# A Wide Range of Normal

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- A central aspect of human experience across the lifespan
- Wide and varied range of normal functioning
- Different meanings/levels of importance to individuals
- If changes are **bothersome or distressing**, then this aspect of life deserves attention





# Impact of Treatment...

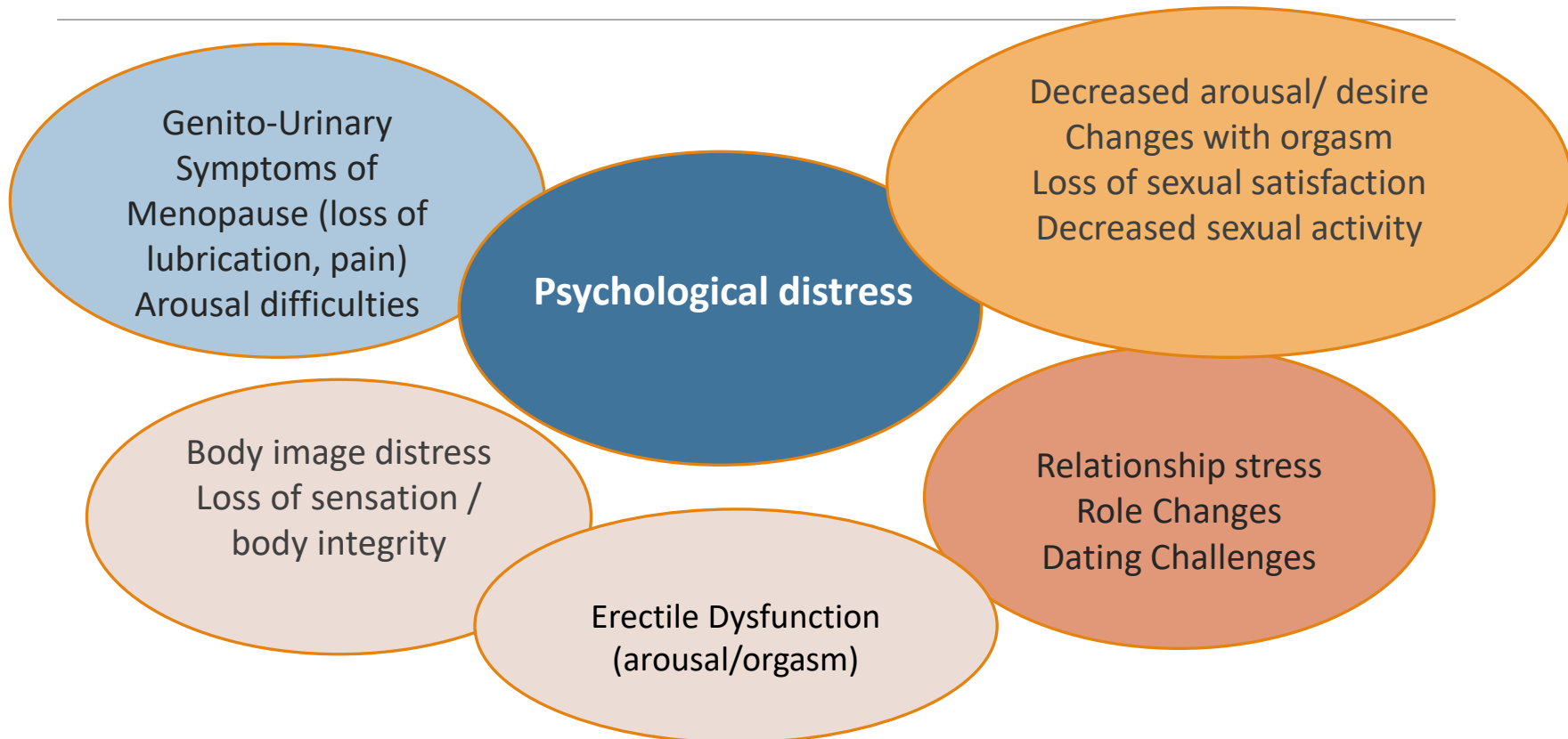
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Every type of cancer treatment (**surgery, radiation, chemotherapy and hormonal therapies**) has potential to disrupt sexuality/intimacy



Very little data regarding **targeted therapies** and sexual health

# Common Sexual Health Problems





# Sexual Side Effects Not Always Obvious

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Loss of  
body parts /  
Body  
Integrity



Surgical  
reconstruction



Pain



Loss of  
sensation



Body Image

# Menopause & Vaginal Health

Estrogen depletion → genitourinary symptoms (GSM) that progress over time

**Vaginal** Changes: ↓ Blood Supply, Glycogen, changes in pH

↓ vaginal length and diameter

↓ lubrication

↓ Elasticity

Pain with sexual activity

↑ inflammation, infection



**Vulvar** Changes: ↓ Collagen,

↓ Testosterone (50% of T made produced by ovaries)

**Urinary Symptoms:** urgency, dysuria & recurrent UTIs

# Restoring Vulvo-Vaginal Health

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✓ Moisture



✓ Stretch



✓ Blood flow



# Managing Vaginal Dryness

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Vaginal moisturizers (3-5x week as needed)

- Lubricants: Water-based/Silicone, Glycerin/Perfume-free
- Coconut oil for perineum/ perineal massage
- If using panty-liners, consider using a sealant like Desitin

With your medical team, can discuss local vaginal estrogen / DHEA

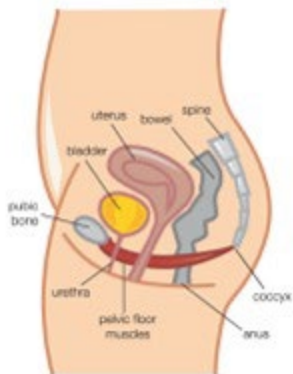
- Can be delivered by ring / tablet / cream



# Learning about the Pelvic Floor...

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- Muscles/tissue stretches like a sling from tailbone to pubic bone.



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- Muscles can lose tone/elasticity; highly reactive to emotional stimuli
- Ability to relax / control pelvic floor muscles aids in preventing discomfort sexual activity and/or pelvic exams.

# Pelvic Floor Rehabilitation!

- **Learned Relaxation of the pelvic floor**
- **Vaginal Dilator Therapy**
  - Mechanically increases stretch
  - Improves competence to relax
  - Addresses muscle-clenching reaction
- **Pelvic Floor Physical Therapy**
  - Manual Therapy, Biofeedback, Home-based exercises



# Supporting Blood flow for Vaginal Health

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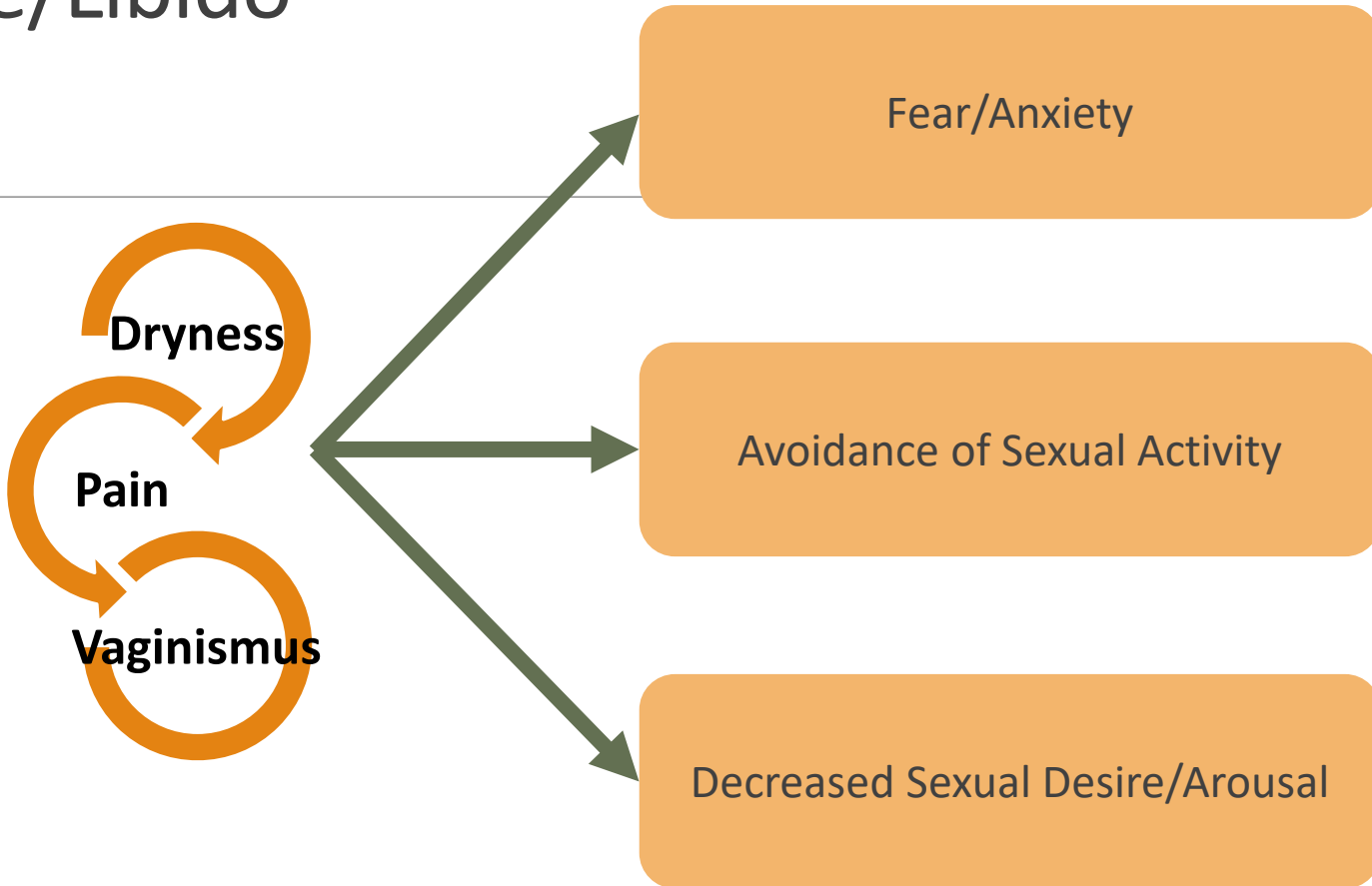
Important to increase oxygenated blood flow to vaginal tissue

Vibrators are therapeutic!





# Desire/Libido



# Common Problems for Men: Erectile Dysfunction

Modify reversible causes

- Medication change or discontinuation
- Lifestyle modification
- Hormone replacement

First-line therapy

- Oral erectogenic agent
- Vacuum erection device
- Couples'/sexual therapy

Second-line therapy

- Intracavernosal self-injection
- Intraurethral alprostadil

Third-line therapy

- Surgical prosthesis
- Vascular reconstruction

# Penile Rehabilitation: Uptake and Adherence

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Majority of men with PC (50–80%) discontinue use of medical interventions for ED (pills, penile injections, vacuum devices) within one yr. of initiating treatment.

## Use of adjunctive sexual rehabilitation counseling:

- increases efficacy of ICI treatment
- decreases drop-out rates
- increases rates of men who respond to oral medications
- provides education to help couples identify and use sexual aids



# Recovery is not only about the Physical Mechanics...

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Other pieces of the sexual recovery puzzle include:

- Becoming aware of **automatic negative thoughts**
- Moving from **avoidance and distraction to acceptance and change**
- Challenging unhelpful **assumptions** around sexual roles, sexual scripts, & expectations
- Improving **body image** and **perceived body integrity**



# Relationship Work

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Understanding sexual history & previous norms: clarify goals, increase communication, set action plan

- ✓ Re-focusing on Pleasure and Sensuality
- ✓ Helping couples expand their repertoire
- ✓ Behavioral exercises such as “Sensate Focus”
- ✓ Addressing concerns about dating
- ✓ Couples’ counseling/couple-based support as needed



# Body Image



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- Body image is not driven by any specific body part
  - Compassion for one's body / non-judging exploration
  - Cultivate kindness, even in the face of loss. Focus on what your body can do, your sense of strength.
  - Invitation to reimagine our sense of self and create a new chapter

# Reset the Frame

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- Acknowledge change/Accept loss/Validating new normal
- Embrace opportunity to chart new course
- Take your time...begin at your own pace
- Focus on specific goals and make an action plan
- Identify what you need: Support is available





# Talk to Your Team

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- Ask how treatment (risk-reducing surgery ) might have potential to impact sexual function or sexual health
- Ask how to get help with any side effects that are **bothersome** or **distressing**
- Ask who you might speak to for further information or support with expertise in sexual medicine
- Don't be afraid to keep seeing help until you get what you need!

# Learn, Access Resources & Advocate!

Dana-Farber  
Cancer Institute

Find a Doctor | Give Now | My Dana-Farber

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HOME / FOR PATIENTS AND FAMILIES / CARE & TREATMENT / SUPPORT SERVICES & AMENITIES / SEXUAL HEALTH PROGRAM / FOR CANCER SURVIVORS

SHARE PRINT EMAIL

## Sexual Health Information For Cancer Survivors

- Coronavirus (COVID-19) Information >
- Cancer Types >
- Treatment Centers and Clinical Services >
- Support Services & Amenities >
- Sexual Health Program >
- For Cancer Survivors >**
- Nursing and Patient Care >
- Your Care Team >

**Sexual/Vaginal Health and Cancer: What you need to know and what have we learned**

Jeannie Carter, PhD  
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Gynecology Service, Department of Surgery  
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TREATMENTS AND SIDE EFFECTS

MANAGING CANCER-RELATED SIDE EFFECTS

FERTILITY AND SEXUAL SIDE EFFECTS IN PEOPLE WITH CANCER

SEX AND THE WOMAN WITH CANCER

## Cancer, Sex, and the Female Body

### Cancer and sex

# THANK YOU!

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