

DEALING WITH ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION AFTER PROSTATE CANCER TREATMENT

For You and Your Partner

(The following information is based on the general experiences of many prostate cancer patients. Your experience may be different.)

What is Erectile Dysfunction?

Erectile dysfunction or impotence is when a man cannot get an erection that is hard enough for him to have sex. Some men may call this “losing their nature.” Erectile dysfunction can be difficult for you and your partner.

Why does Erectile Dysfunction Happen with Prostate Cancer Treatment?

The prostate is a gland, which is about the size of a walnut, is located under the bladder surrounding the upper part of the urethra. The urethra is a tube that carries urine and semen through the penis to the outside of the body. There are many muscles and nerves, which surround the prostate gland which may be damaged during prostate cancer treatment. This can happen with both radiation and surgery. Hormone treatments decrease the amount of testosterone in your body. Testosterone is the male hormone that

affects your interest in sex. The side effects of the treatment you choose vary from man to man.

Surgery

For a period of time after surgery, many men are not able to get an erection. This time varies for each man. It can be less than a month or longer than a month.

However, you may find that you cannot have an erection even a year or more after surgery. Your ability to have an erection after your surgery will depend on whether your cancer was close to the nerves that control erections, whether you had erections before surgery, and your age. If you were having problems having erections before surgery, these problems will not be better after surgery.

If you are able to have an erection after surgery, there will be no semen (the fluid that comes out when you have sex) ejaculated when you have an orgasm. The prostate gland makes this fluid. When your prostate gland is removed, there will be no more semen. This surprises some men if they are not expecting it, but this is normal after your prostate gland is removed. (See IMPACT brochure “Getting Ready for Prostate Cancer Surgery”.) This also means that you will not be able to father a child after surgery.

Radiation Therapy

Radiation therapy may also damage the nerves around your prostate. If you have radiation therapy, you may not have erectile dysfunction right away. Some men start having erectile dysfunction 6 months or more after their radiation therapy. If this happens, the erectile dysfunction usually does not improve. (See IMPACT brochure “Radiation Therapy”.)

Hormone Treatment

Hormone treatment does not damage the nerves or muscles around the prostate gland. However, if you have hormone treatment, you may find that you are not interested in sex, and it is possible that you will have erectile dysfunction, too. This happens because the treatment decreases the amount of testosterone in your body. Testosterone makes you interested in sex. (See IMPACT brochure “Hormone Treatment and You”.)

Can Anything Be Done for Erectile Dysfunction?

Yes! There are a number of things that you can try if you have erectile dysfunction. Your doctor may prescribe a medicine called Viagra for you. This helps some men have an erection when they have erectile dysfunction. If Viagra does not help you have an erection or if there is another reason why you can't take Viagra, your doctor may try a medicine that is injected into the base of your penis before you have sex. This medicine will help you have an erection. There are ways to help you have an erection without you

having to take a medication. For example, an external device called a vacuum pump can help you have an erection. If you have erectile dysfunction, talk to your doctor or nurse case manager about it. Medicines for erectile dysfunction are not presently covered by IMPACT, but they may be in the future.

How Will Erectile Dysfunction Affect My Sex Life?

Most men find that their sex life is different after prostate cancer treatment. Some men question their manliness when they cannot have an erection or find that they are not interested in sex. This can happen even if you are not currently in an intimate relationship. You may find that this is upsetting. Even if one of the medications or erection aids is helpful, having sex using this may take some getting used to. It may not feel entirely natural. You can talk with your doctor or nurse case manager about these feelings. IMPACT also offers short term counseling if you have concerns about the side effects of your prostate cancer treatment.

If you have an intimate partner, it is important to talk to your partner about how you are feeling. With time, you and your partner may be able to find satisfying ways to have a sex life even though you have erectile dysfunction. Your partner will also have concerns about your sex life as well as concerns about your health. Talking about your feelings is very important during this time. Some couples find it helpful to talk to a counselor, their minister, or health professional. Please talk to your nurse case manager about how you

are doing with intimacy. Counseling sessions may be available through the IMPACT program.

What Can I, As a Partner, Expect?

One of the effects of prostate cancer treatment is erectile dysfunction or impotence. This affects not only the patient, but you, too, as his intimate partner. He may not be able to have erections that are hard enough for him to have sex with you or may not be interested in sex. This does not have anything to do with his feelings for you, but is a result of his cancer treatment. Erectile dysfunction can be difficult for both of you.

You may want to reassure your partner that sex is not as important as long as he is healthy and that he is no less of a man to you. However, it is important to understand that sex may be very important to both of you. It may be helpful to reassure him that you will work through it with him, that you understand his feelings, and explain how important he is to you. Again, please don't hesitate to talk to your partner's nurse case manager, if you are having difficulties with your partner's erectile dysfunction.