

# Physical Intimacy and Metastatic Breast Cancer





# Metastatic breast cancer doesn't have to mean the end of intimacy



Physical touch is an important part of life and relationships. However, people with metastatic breast cancer (MBC) may find it hard to be sexual the same way as before their diagnosis.

MBC had negative effects on the sex lives of almost three-quarters of people as reported by a study.

MBC doesn't have to mean the end of your sex life. With some patience, a lot of communication, and a little bit of creativity, you can still have intimacy with your partner. This brochure will help you learn about common obstacles to sexual intimacy for people with MBC. It will also give you some possible solutions to discuss with your doctor.



# Obstacles

## MBC can create obstacles to sex



In surveys, people with MBC often say they have little to no sex drive or that certain physical limitations make it harder for them to have sex. Common issues include:

- Low sex drive because of treatments for MBC
- Poor body image due to surgery, weight gain, or weight loss
- Aches and pains
- Difficulty finding sex positions that are comfortable and safe
- Lack of information about how MBC affects sex
- Doctors who avoid talking about sex
- Anxiety, depression, or other emotional or mental health conditions that can lower sex drive
- In females:
  - Dryness or pain in the vagina
  - Discomfort or itching in or around the vagina
  - Difficulty achieving orgasm
- In males:
  - Difficulty achieving and maintaining an erection
  - Premature ejaculation

These obstacles can be caused by MBC itself, by treatments, or by related conditions like depression. However, people with MBC can and often do overcome these obstacles.



## Communicate your needs

Communication is the most important part of having a healthy and rewarding sex life. The first step is to think about what your sexual needs are. Once you understand your needs, you will have an easier time talking with your partner.



### Communicating with your partner

Try to have an ongoing conversation with your partner about intimacy. Don't feel like you have to solve the problem right away.

- First, talk to each other about how you feel about sex without trying to find a solution
- Once you understand each other's needs, you can work together toward a solution
- You may want to talk to a couples counselor to help find a solution

Many couples benefit from defining sex as more than intercourse, or changing their routine. This can be:

- Intimate touch, such as cuddling, hand-holding, or massage
- New sexual positions, such as side-lying
- Sex toys, such as vibrators or special cushions to provide comfort
- Oral sex or mutual masturbation





## Communicating with your doctor

It can be uncomfortable to share private details about your sex life with your doctor. But they can give you the best information on what is and is not safe for you and your partner. Here are some tips:

- Start an ongoing conversation with your doctor
- Consider it just another type of lifestyle question for your doctor, like questions about diet and exercise
- Be specific about the problem, whether it's physical or mental

Examples of questions you may want to ask your doctor include: "Will this new treatment affect my sex drive?" or "I've been having problems with vaginal dryness; can you recommend something to help?"

*"I don't necessarily want to hang on to relationships as they stand. I want them to grow and evolve and become even better relationships."*

— Person with MBC



## Coping with low sex drive



For some couples, low sex drive isn't a problem. But for many, this is upsetting to one or both partners. If this happens, it may be time to seek help.

Low sex drive can be treated in many ways.

### Individual or couples therapy

Seeing a professional, like a psychologist, psychiatrist, sex therapist, or couples counselor, can be a great way to explore what's behind a low sex drive and how to overcome it. These professionals can help with:

- Communication between partners
- Ways to have intimacy without sex
- Body image
- Past trauma that may affect sex

Your doctor or insurance provider can help you find the right therapist.

### Prescription medicine

Some prescription medicines are available for women and men to help improve sex drive. Talk to your doctor to see if medicine could help you.





## Coping with vaginal dryness



Vaginal dryness can make sex uncomfortable or painful. It is a common side effect of many treatments for MBC. Vaginal dryness affected more than three-quarters of people who took part in one study. Lubricants and moisturizers (intended for vaginal use) can help with vaginal dryness.

Lubricants are sold without a prescription. You can find them at pharmacies. Different types of lubricants work best for different needs. One example is water-based lubricants, which are widely available. These work with latex condoms and silicone sex toys, but they don't last long. Silicone-based lubricants last longer but they don't work with silicone toys. Your doctor can help you decide on the best one.

Over-the-counter vaginal moisturizers can relieve everyday vaginal irritation. They can be used any time. These come in different forms, including gels and creams. Your doctor or pharmacist can help you choose one.

### Prescription products

Some prescription treatments are available. Talk to your doctor about whether a prescription treatment could work for you.

## Coping with erection and ejaculation problems



Some people with MBC are male, and sometimes they also have sexual problems due to poor body image, anxiety and depression, the disease itself, and its treatments. People with MBC often say that cancer has led to difficulties achieving an erection (erectile dysfunction), reaching orgasm, or so-called "dry orgasms." Dry orgasms are orgasms without ejaculation. Erectile dysfunction is a common side effect of hormone therapy.

There are many options to cope with these problems. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about what treatment is right for you.

# Resources

The resources below can help you find more information and referrals for the support needs of people with MBC.

Learn more about MBC and physical intimacy at:  
**LillyOncology.com**

#### **Breastcancer.org**

- General information about sexuality and breast cancer
- Resources for support groups, medical professionals, and mental health specialists

#### **American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists (aasect.org)**

- Database of AASECT-certified counselors or therapists