



## PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR TACKLING LOW LIBIDO AFTER CANCER

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**Note: This handout is offered as a communication aid for patients and their providers. It is not a substitute for professional examination, diagnosis, or treatment.**

### INTRODUCTION

Low libido can be incredibly frustrating for the person experiencing it and their intimate partner.

### SIGNS OF LOW LIBIDO

According to the [Cleveland Clinic](#), the signs of a decrease in sexual desire compared to your normal level include:

- The decrease or lack of desire for anything to do with sex or sexual touching, including masturbation
- A decrease in sexual fantasies or thoughts of sex
- Feeling unhappy or distressed about having a low desire for sexual activity

### LOW LIBIDO CAN HAVE MANY CAUSES DURING AND AFTER CANCER

Low libido can affect the quality of life. It may have [multiple causes](#), such as body image issues, fatigue, nausea, vaginal pain and or pain with penetration, [vaginal dryness](#), depression, anxiety, erectile dysfunction, [pain with ejaculation](#) or in the genitals, chronic pain, changes in relationships, androgen deprivation therapy, and menopause.

Self-introspection by writing down thoughts and feelings, symptoms, and talking with a counselor, social worker, and or provider can help identify the causes. Once causes are identified, steps can be taken to tackle the issues.

### PRACTICAL WAYS TO TACKLE THE KNOWN CAUSES ASSOCIATED WITH CANCER AND CANCER TREATMENT

#### Body Image

Self-affirmation, working with a counselor, skin care regimens, practicing self-love, and an intimacy technique known as Sensate Focus may tackle these issues.

#### Fatigue

Fatigue is a significant contributor to low libido. Exercise, good sleep hygiene, meditation, certain medications, and self-affirmation are often effective in tackling fatigue.

## **Nausea**

Consider keeping a journal to track what causes nausea: certain smells, situations, or specific times after your treatment. Let your oncologist know your nausea is not being adequately controlled. Meditation and aroma therapy can often help alleviate nausea.

## **Vaginal Pain and or Pain with Penetration**

See a gynecologist specializing in sexual health to determine what is causing the pain. Pelvic Floor Therapy, Sensate Focus, and or lubricant may be helpful. *After Cancer* has handouts for each of these topics.

## **Vaginal Dryness**

Vaginal dryness is often a side effect of cancer treatment, menopause, and or anxiety. Some strategies to help resolve this issue are:

- Take intimacy slowly
- High-quality, low-pH personal lubricant without irritants (see After Cancer handout on lubricants)
- Vaginal moisturizers
- Patience
- Talking openly with your intimate partner may help
- See your gynecologist if problems persist
- Don't force intimacy, as that will heighten anxiety and may lead to injury of the fragile vaginal tissue
- Consider trying the Sensate Focus technique to alleviate anxiety about intimacy

*After Cancer* has handouts on: Managing Sexual Dysfunction with Pelvic Floor Physical Therapy, Lubricant, Sensate Focus: Touching Exercise to Rediscover Intimacy, Ways To Reduce the Impact of Cancer Therapy On the Vulva And Vagina

## **Depression and Anxiety**

Exercise and good sleep hygiene are essential to fight depression and or anxiety. See your PCP and request a counselor referral. Appropriate medication prescribed by your PCP, oncologist, or psychiatrist may help.

## **Erectile Dysfunction**

See a urologist. Pelvic Floor Therapy may be helpful (*After Cancer* has an educational handout on this topic). Self-affirmation and a progressive intimacy technique known as Sensate Focus are often helpful.

After Cancer has a handout on Sensate Focus.

## **Pain In the Male Genitals or With Ejaculation**

See a urologist. Pelvic Floor Therapy may be helpful with this pain. Pain may occur with ejaculation after treatment of the prostate or urethra; see your PCP, oncologist, or urologist about this pain without delay.

## Urinary Or Fecal Incontinence

**Body image** issues and anxiety often arise with incontinence. See your PCP for an appropriate referral; ask for a referral for an evaluation by a physical therapist specializing in Pelvic Floor Therapy.

## Chronic Pain

Chronic pain affects sleep and the overall quality of life and often needs a multi-pronged approach:

- If a root cause is determined, consider working with Palliative Care or Pain Management specialists to help control the symptoms.
- For some, medical marijuana is effective.
- Meditation is often helpful in addressing chronic pain.
- Practice good sleep hygiene.
- Ask for a physical therapy referral, as the therapist may have beneficial insight and treatment.
- Often, behavioral health counseling can be helpful with chronic pain.

## Changes In Relationships

Cancer and treatment can be stressful in a relationship. Counseling may help the relationship or in the aftermath of a breakup. See your PCP to determine if an anti-depressant may be helpful. Practice self-affirmation and learn to love yourself.

## Androgen Deprivation Therapy (ADT)

ADT may be given intermittently to help alleviate some of the sexual function side effects – discuss this option with your oncologist.

- [Testosterone decreases with ADT](#), possibly causing a male to feel less masculine.
- Depression has been associated with ADT, which can further lower libido. If you think you are depressed, discuss this with your oncologist or your PCP – exercise, good sleep hygiene, and medication can help.

After Cancer has a handout, [Minimize and Treat Androgen Deprivation Therapy \(ADT\) Side Effects](#)

## Many other potential causes

Consider keeping a journal to track your symptoms and potential causes of low libido. Explore your notes with your oncologist, PCP, urologist, or gynecologist.

## Talk with Your Oncologist, PCP, Urologist, or Gynecologist, and Your Intimate Partner

It is important that low libido is [discussed with a provider](#). It can affect relationships, lead to self-esteem issues and cause depression.

Journalized thoughts and noted symptoms can help with this discussion. Having the notes to look at while seeing a provider may make this topic more manageable and comfortable to discuss.

Practice self-love and affirmation. Consider joining a cancer support group; there will be many others who are or have experienced low libido and can provide strong support.

Talk honestly and openly with your intimate partner.

**To further your knowledge and comfort, After Cancer recommends also reading the following patient handouts:**

Managing Sexual Dysfunction with Pelvic Floor Physical Therapy

Let's Slide Into Lubricant

Sensate Focus: Touching Exercise to Rediscover Intimacy

Penile Rehabilitation with VED

Minimize and Treat Androgen Deprivation Therapy (ADT) Side Effects

Ways To Reduce the Impact of Cancer Therapy On the Vulva And Vagina

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