Practical Considerations for Anal Intimacy During and After Cancer Treatment

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After Cancer

Introduction

Many people practice and enjoy anal intimacy. Cancer and cancer treatment can negatively impact this form of intimacy.

Whether penetration is with a penis, finger, dildo, and or sex toy, there are important things to consider and understand before and during anal intimacy.

Later in this handout, sections are dedicated to considerations for the **receptive** and **penetrative** partners.

Essential Considerations for Both Penetrative and Receptive Partners

- Honest communication and conversation with one's intimate partner are critical to prevent possible complications when engaging in anal intimacy during and after cancer.
- If something is painful or uncomfortable, there is a need to make your partner aware.
- Talk about your discomfort, how it makes you feel, and if there is an alternate form of intimacy you would like to try until you are ready to try anal intimacy again.
- Be patient and honest with yourself and your partner.
- Clean toys well after each use with hot, soapy water or per the manufacturer's instructions.
- The lining of the anus is delicate; small tears can occur easily. Generous use of lubricant, care, and relaxation can help prevent tears.
- Avoid lubricant that is flavored, warming, or scented.
- According to the World Health Organization, the normal rectal pH is about 7.0, or neutral. A lubricant with a pH of around 7.0 is preferable for anal penetration to avoid irritation. The pH should be visible in the labeling of the lubricant.
- The anus has two sphincters; relaxation helps these sphincters to open. Anxiety and or fear of pain may cause the sphincters to tighten, making insertion difficult.
- Urinate (pee) after anal intimacy to help prevent infection.
- Avoid using toys with multiple partners, and do not share toys with others. Each partner should have sex toys and dildos dedicated to them.
- If you have multiple partners, insist on the use of condoms and dental dams to prevent exposure to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), infections (STIs), and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Considerations for Receptive Partners

Anal sensitivity and or pain with intimacy may decrease after a few months, but it may also be permanent.

Radiation treatment to the abdomen or the pelvic area can cause several changes to the anus and rectal tissue. The anus, the skin inside the anus, and or the rectal lining may be easily irritated. Care and patience with unrushed advancement of intimacy are needed to avoid injury or complications. Smaller, gentle, and coaxing forms of anal penetration may help.

The prostate may be less sensitive to stimulation after radiation treatment.

After surgical removal of the prostate, there will not be the same sensation of pleasure. It may take some time to learn how to experience other pleasurable sensations.

Anal penetration after surgery for rectal cancer may cause trauma and issues where the rectum and colon are reconnected. This surgical connection is also called anastomosis. Discuss with your surgeon when and how it will be safe for anal penetration for you. Colorectal surgeons will not be phased by this question.

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.

Points on Anal Intimacy for the Receptive Partner

- Talk with your surgeon or oncologist before trying anal penetration after cancer treatment to ensure it is safe for you.
- Avoid anal (or vaginal) penetration if your platelet count is below 50,000. There are other ways to enjoy intimacy until your platelet count is above 50,000, such as mutual masturbation, petting, and or cuddling.
- Speak up right away if anything is uncomfortable or causes pain.
- Contact your surgeon or oncologist if something does not feel right, pain persists after anal penetration, or you feel ill.
- Condoms are important for your penetrative partner to use if you are not sure if they are STD and STI-free. Condoms are also important to if you or your partner engage with multiple partners.
- Ensure your penetrative partner uses plenty of lube.
- Speak up as soon as you sense more lube is needed.

Considerations for Penetrative Partners During or After Cancer Treatment

If you are receiving oral or intravenous chemotherapy or immunotherapy, wear a condom or a dental dam for a week after your last dose to avoid exposing your partner to possible toxic medication in your semen or saliva.

It is a good idea to wear a dental dam when performing oral sex (anal or vaginal) to avoid exposure to HPV (human papillomavirus), other STDs (sexually transmitted diseases), or HIV (human immunodeficiency virus).

If you are immune suppressed, avoid exposing your mouth to areas where there is possibly poop, such as the anus, to prevent becoming ill. Immune suppression occurs with:

- a low white blood cell count
- a stem cell transplant within the past year
- steroid use

A firm penile erection is needed to accomplish anal penetration with the penis. A firm erection may be a challenge after treatment for prostate cancer, surgery of the penis, surgery or radiation to the lower abdomen or pelvis.

Possible Ways to Improve Erections:

- pelvic floor exercises, Pelvic Floor Physical Therapy
- erection aids such as a vacuum pump or constriction ring around the base of your penis
- medication

Talk with your oncologist or urologist about ways to help firm your erection. Enjoyable anal penetration for your partner can be accomplished with other means, such as your fingers, sex toys, or a dildo. There are other forms of penile pleasure you can experience during an intimate encounter with your partner.

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

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

- Managing Sexual Dysfunction with Pelvic Floor Therapy
- Penile Rehabilitation Using a VED
- Let's Slide Into Lubricant
- Sensate Focus: Touching Exercise to Rediscover Intimacy
- Practical Solutions for Low Libido

Scan for More **Patient Resources & Handouts**

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