

# Dating and Relationships During and After Cancer

Cancer can cause emotional and physical changes that affect how you feel about dating and relationships. If you are single and have cancer, you likely have the same needs as someone who is married, has a partner, or is in a relationship. But meeting these needs comes with its own unique set of challenges.

Learn more about deciding when to start dating after a cancer diagnosis and how to bring up the topic in a new relationship.

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# Common dating concerns when you have cancer

You may have been dating or thinking about dating before you got cancer. Or you may find yourself newly single following the end of a relationship.

Side effects and body changes from cancer treatment can impact how you feel about new relationships, including sexual ones. You might worry how a future partner will react when you tell them about your cancer, changes in your body, or fertility problems.

**But research shows that many people who have completed cancer treatment are as likely to find someone to date as people without cancer.**

If you've recently finished treatment, dating may be more of a challenge at first. If the person you are interested in dating is also a cancer survivor or has lost a loved one to cancer, this can also be challenging. But each person reacts differently, and dating after cancer is likely to get easier over time.

## **If you are single and have cancer, you might be worried about:**

- Telling a possible partner about your cancer, including when to tell them and how much to share.
- Feeling unattractive or insecure if your appearance has changed through hair loss, weight changes, or loss of a body part.
- Side effects such as fatigue, pain, neuropathy, bowel or bladder problems, or changes in how you walk or talk.
- Being able to have healthy children in the future.
- Starting a relationship in case your cancer comes back.
- Taking your clothes off or having sex.
- Feeling the need to move quickly in a relationship because you don't want to "waste time."

With time, practice, and support, you can overcome many of these challenges.

## **When is the right time to start dating after a cancer diagnosis?**

Only you can decide when you're ready to start dating. Some people say dating helps them feel "normal" and going out helps keep their mind off cancer. But many other people have concerns about dating and sexual intimacy after cancer treatment.

You might find it hard to date or start a new relationship during treatment. If you're recovering from surgery, getting regular treatments, or dealing with side effects of medicines, being "yourself" on a date can be hard.

Your appearance might have changed, or you may have less energy. In addition to your usual work or home responsibilities, you might have to use some of your personal time for treatment or other health care visits. Many people with cancer wait to start dating until treatment has ended or until they've had a chance to recover.

### **When you are ready to start dating, you might want to:**

- Practice positive self-talk. Make a list of your positive qualities and how you can highlight them.
- Tell your friends and family you are ready to meet new people to date.
- Try a new activity, join a club, or take a class to meet new people.
- Talk with other cancer survivors who have started dating.
- Practice how you might react if a person turns you down, if that's something you're concerned about.

## **When and how to talk about cancer in a new relationship**

When you decide to date after finding out you have cancer, you'll likely wonder if and when you should share that you're a cancer survivor.

You might want to share information about your cancer up front, when you first meet someone. If you use a dating app, you might even list it in your profile. You might want to share this information when you first meet someone face-to-face. Or you might prefer to wait until you've been dating someone for a while or until a relationship becomes serious.

**Studies show that people who are dating a cancer survivor would prefer the topic not come up until after a few dates. This allows for time to establish a sense of mutual trust before sharing details about your cancer.**

You may never feel comfortable talking about your cancer, but it's best to tell the person you're dating about your cancer before making a strong commitment.

### **How to bring it up**

Before sharing about your cancer diagnosis, consider how you would feel most comfortable doing it.

Some people just talk about their cancer experience. Others show scars or other body changes from their cancer. Some express their fears and concerns through humor. In preparing for the conversation, do what is best for you.

You may find it helpful to have “the cancer talk” when you and your partner are relaxed and in an intimate mood.

Tell your partner you have something important to share. After you share, ask an “open-ended question” that leaves room for them to answer in many ways. This gives them a chance to take in the new information and think about how to respond. It also helps you see how they take the news.

## **What to say**

### **You might want to start with something like this:**

- “I really like where our relationship is going. I need you to know that I have (or had) \_\_\_\_\_ cancer. How do you think that might affect our relationship?”

### **You can also share your feelings:**

- “I have (or had) \_\_\_\_\_ cancer. I guess I haven’t wanted to bring it up because I’ve been worried about how you’ll react. It also scares me to think about it, but I need you to know about it. What are your thoughts or feelings about this?”

You may also want to talk about the chance that your cancer might come back and any physical limits you may have because of your cancer. Sharing your feelings about dating or starting a relationship may also help to encourage your partner to talk about how they feel.

### **It can help to write down what you want to say or practice how you might tell a dating partner about your cancer.**

- What message do you want to give?
- Try some different ways of saying it and ask a friend for feedback.
- Did you come across the way you wanted to?
- Ask your friend to take the role of a new partner and have them give you different responses to your question.
- Pay attention to how you feel after each response.

## How much to share about your cancer experience

If you've had a body part removed, or if you have an ostomy, large scars, or a sexual problem, you may be worried about when or how much to tell a new dating partner. You may want to tell your full cancer history all at once or during a few talk sessions. There are no rules, but telling the truth and trusting the person you're talking to are very important.

## The possibility of being turned down

It's possible that someone you'd like to date might not want to date a cancer survivor. Once they know your full story, it might be too much for them to handle. But remember, people turn each other down all the time for many reasons — looks, beliefs, personality, or their own issues.

This is a good time to seek support from friends and loved ones and look for other ways to expand your social circle, so you don't feel alone.

## Connecting with others

Whether you want to start dating, expand your social circle or both, reconnecting with old friends and building a new group of casual and close friends can help you feel supported. Make the effort to call friends, plan visits, and share activities. They may be afraid to bother you so you may need to reach out first.

Get involved in hobbies, special interest groups, or classes that will increase your social circle. [Support groups](#) can help, too. Some groups are for people who are cancer survivors.

There are many in-person and online support groups that include people who are single. Connecting, learning, and sharing your story with people who are in similar situations can be very helpful. You can feel more supported and confident when someone listens to you and truly understands.

Feeling more confident in yourself can also help you feel ready to date and able to handle the possibility of being turned down.

You may want to try one-on-one or group counseling as well. This can help you feel more positive about yourself and get feedback about your strengths from others.

## Learn more

## How Cancer Can Affect Sex and Intimacy



Cancer and its treatment can affect your sex organs, sex drive, sexual function, and body image. Learn about managing and adapting to these changes.

### Written by

### References



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