

Coping with Appearance Changes Due to Breast Cancer

Tips to Help Improve Your Body Image

An important relationship in your life has likely changed since you were diagnosed with breast cancer – your relationship with your body. This relationship is quite special and private and may need some extra care and attention.

At some point during or after your cancer treatment, changes to your appearance will likely upset you. This is entirely normal and experienced by nearly all breast cancer survivors. Some women have a harder time than others dealing with appearance and body changes.

Some important questions to ask yourself right now are:

- Are you feeling concerned or uncomfortable about changes to your appearance and body?
- Are you worried about upcoming changes to your body?
- Do you spend a lot of time thinking about changes to your appearance?
- Do you avoid certain activities because of concerns about your appearance?

Nearly all breast cancer survivors will answer “yes” to one or more of these questions. This information is about breast cancer survivors’ struggles with their changed body image. A variety of tips are offered to help you cope. The changes you experience to your body are personal, private and may cause difficult emotions. The good news is that you can help yourself achieve a better relationship with your body.

What is body image?

The term “body image” means different things to different people. Body image is more than just a mental picture of what you look like. It is more than thinking you look fat, that your thighs are too big or that a certain outfit makes you look good. Body image refers to the personal relationship you have with your entire body – the way you perceive, think and feel about all aspects of your body and the way it functions.

If you are like most women, you tend to focus mainly on those aspects of your appearance or your body that you dislike and pay little attention to those things you appreciate and enjoy.

Stop for a moment and consider how the following aspects of your body image influence the way you feel about yourself. Are you satisfied with any of these? Are you unhappy with any of these?

- Appearance of eyes
- Appetite
- Arms
- Breasts/chest
- Buttocks

- Cheeks/cheekbones
- Ears
- Energy level
- Eyesight
- Facial complexion
- Feet
- Flexibility
- Hair (color, thickness, texture)
- Hearing
- Height
- Legs
- Lips
- Muscle tone
- Nose
- Physical coordination
- Sex drive/sexual activities
- Teeth
- Voice quality
- Weight

The way you see your body is not necessarily the same as the way other people see you. Do any of the following examples sound familiar? You have a friend who complains about wanting to lose 5 to 10 pounds or more but you think she looks great the way she is. You are with a colleague who compliments you on your hairstyle or what you are wearing, but you happen to think you do not look good at all that day.

The most important thing to understand about body image is that it is entirely subjective and personal. This means it has nothing to do with what other people see or how they view your body and the way it functions – it is entirely about what you think, feel and perceive.

What affects body image?

The way you feel about your body can change based on what you are experiencing in the moment. Some days we feel great about our bodies, yet at other times we are unsatisfied or uncomfortable. Imagine yourself in these scenes:

1. You make special plans to go to your favorite restaurant with family or friends. As you are getting dressed, you put on your favorite outfit and feel the silky fabric against your skin. How does this feel? You then eat a large meal and have dessert, too. How does your body feel right after eating?
2. You decide to plant some new flowers in the garden in the heat of the day. How does your body feel while working outside? You go inside to clean up. How do you feel after you have showered and put on fresh clothes?
3. You go to an aerobics class that is particularly challenging. How does your body feel during the rigorous workout? How do you feel afterward?

As you can see, body image is quite complex and can be influenced by many things, including:

- What you are wearing?
- How you are feeling physically?
- What you are doing?
- Who is with you?

Body image and your relationship with your body play an important role in your life – both before and after your cancer diagnosis. It is important to keep in mind that women without breast cancer often struggle with how they feel about themselves and their appearance. Breast cancer and its treatment introduce additional challenges and changes to your body that will require you to adapt and adjust over time. The process of adapting to a changed body image can be different for each person.

When to Seek Additional Help

All women with breast cancer, experience some degree of distress related to their diagnosis and treatment. However, there are times when you may need additional help coping with changes to your body. If you find yourself having difficulty, you should consider talking to a psychologist or counselor about your concerns. Remember, being concerned about changes to your body is a normal part of this process. It is OK to ask for help and support in coping with these changes.

Body Image and Our Culture

How does our culture influence our body image?

The way we judge our appearance and the way we feel about our body is largely influenced by the cultural messages we see and hear each day. TV shows, magazines, billboards and the Internet bombard us with images of thin women. This can lead us to believe that having a “perfect body” will lead us to success, love and happiness.

These messages tell us that we are valued for how we look rather than for our intellect or personality.

It is difficult to avoid these messages, but important to realize that the images shown in the media are often not of “real” women. For example, photographs are airbrushed or altered in some way. In addition, **the body sizes of most models and actresses are not attainable by most women and generally do not reflect a normal, healthy female size.**

¹Did you know that the average fashion model today is 5’10”, weighs 120 pounds and has a 23-inch waist? In comparison, the average American woman is 5’4”, weighs 165 pounds and has a 37-inch waist. (¹Source: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/bodymeas.htm>. Nanci Hellmich, “Do thin models warp girls’ body image?” USA Today 9/26/2006)

The pursuit of the “perfect body” may lead you to feel self-critical and unattractive. It can also lead to unsafe weight loss strategies and extreme exercise behaviors.

Ways to Challenge Harmful Cultural Messages About Appearance

Most women compare their bodies to those around them. When you do this, it is easy to forget that your body is unique. You have a certain shape, size, weight and appearance that is distinct only to you. Your body has a natural weight and shape that it will take when you routinely exercise and eat a healthy diet.

Do you think the only way you can be happy is to lose weight or change the way you look? Think for a moment about what qualities you admire in a loved one or a good friend. Is it how thin or attractive she is? Or is it her honesty, compassion, forgiveness and support? When we focus on our body flaws, we often forget about all the good qualities we have that others easily see in us.

Try these three tips to help challenge harmful cultural messages:

1. Be more critical when you look at advertisements in magazines. Remind yourself that many of these pictures are not real. They have been altered to make the models look thinner and to remove “flaws” in her appearance.
2. Take some time to reflect on the things you like or enjoy about your body rather than focusing on all the things you do not like and want to change.
3. Make a list of things you like about yourself that are not related to your appearance.

Body Image and Breast Cancer

Why is it common for women with breast cancer to have body image concerns?

Every woman with breast cancer will experience changes to her body and to her appearance. Many of these changes are necessary to treat your cancer and prolong your life. Having concerns about these changes is completely normal and to be expected.

One of the main reasons why women find it hard to adjust to body image and appearance changes is because breasts are a symbol of beauty and femininity in our culture. Having your breasts removed or altered due to cancer treatment may cause you to feel less attractive and less secure with your sexuality. Depending on the type of cancer and treatment you have, you may experience a wide range of body changes. Some appearance changes happen all at once, such as losing part or all of a breast during surgery. Other appearance changes tend to happen more slowly. For example, radiation and chemotherapy can cause side effects to occur over a period of many months. Some changes are temporary, while others may be more long-lasting.

Each woman with breast cancer has her own unique reaction to body image changes. Some women have many concerns about body image before treatment begins; others do not have these concerns until during or even after treatment is completed.

You may be surprised by which changes to your body and appearance bother you. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to feel about the changes you experience; your feelings are your own.

Preparing for Body Image Changes

Making decisions about breast cancer treatment can be hard. Many women are given different surgical options, and each option can affect body image in different ways.

In addition to choosing the type of surgery, you may also need to consider radiation, chemotherapy and reconstructive treatment. Having to make many of these treatment decisions at once can be especially overwhelming. Reach out for support from family, friends and your health care team.

Learn as much as you can about your treatment options so that you feel comfortable making these decisions. It is important to understand how each treatment option might affect your body.

What body image and appearance changes should you expect?

Before you choose or start treatment, it is important to talk with your health care team about what types of body image and appearance changes to expect. They can best explain and describe what might happen based on your type of cancer and treatment plan.

Depending on the type of breast cancer you have, you may be able to choose which type of surgery you prefer. Also, if you decide to have breast reconstruction, you may have more than one option from which to choose. Your doctor will ask you to choose the type of reconstruction you want and when you want to have it done.

Because there are so many decisions to make, many women feel overwhelmed and do not want to ask questions about how treatment may affect their appearance. In particular, they worry about being seen as “vain” or too focused on their looks. **Having concerns about how you look after treatment is perfectly normal.** These concerns are as important as concerns about treating your cancer or recurrence. Being concerned about how you look only becomes a problem if it is more important than effectively treating your cancer. If you find yourself struggling with this, you may benefit from talking with a psychologist or counselor about your concerns.

General Tips and Advice

The following tips and advice listed below can help you better prepare for body image changes that may result from cancer treatment:

- **Talk openly with your health care team about your concerns.** Write down your specific questions and bring them with you to your appointments. It may also help to bring a family member or a friend with you.
- **Specific questions you may want to consider asking:**
 - How will this treatment affect the size and shape of my breasts?
 - What type of scarring can I expect from this treatment?
 - What will the scars look like just after surgery?
 - How much can I expect the scars to fade over time?
 - How much swelling will I have with this surgery?
 - How will the swelling change or improve over time?

- What kinds of changes can I expect if I have my lymph nodes removed?
- How might this treatment affect my weight?
- Will I lose my hair?
- How will this treatment affect the sensations in my breasts?
- Should I expect to feel numbness or pain? How long do these effects typically last?
- What problems could affect the way my breasts will look?
- **Ask yourself, what are your ultimate body image goals?** Talk with your doctor about whether these goals are realistic.
- **Be flexible.** Prepare to adjust your expectations as you go through treatment.
- **Be patient.** Your body needs time to heal and recover from treatment. Focus on and appreciate small improvements. Try not be discouraged if you do not see improvements right away. Expect changes, as the healing process can take many months.
- **Use reliable sources of information to help you prepare for treatment.** Do not base your treatment expectations upon what you have learned on the internet or from other breast cancer survivors. Each breast cancer survivor has a unique body type and cancer experience. While it is good to seek support and information from others, do not expect the same exact results.

Breast Surgery

Nearly all women with breast cancer end up needing surgery to remove all or part of their breast(s). No matter how much you prepare, you are likely to be anxious and feel shocked and surprised when you see your breasts for the first time after surgery.

Many women have a picture in their mind of how they will look after surgery. You may look better or worse than you thought, but probably not exactly like you expected. Every woman reacts differently to the scarring and changes to her breast size and shape. It is OK to be upset. How you feel will likely get better over time.

Other tips for coping with body image changes right after surgery include:

- View your breasts as soon as you are comfortable and ready. Try to do this within the first few days of surgery or before you leave the hospital. The more time you wait to see yourself, the more anxious you may become. Seeing yourself in the early stages of recovery will help you better understand and appreciate the changes to your appearance that will happen over time.
- Understand that your appearance changes may be the most drastic immediately after surgery. Try not to focus too much on how your breasts initially appear. Your appearance will change over time.
- Remember that it can take months for some of the swelling from your surgery to go away.
- Take part in social activities as soon as you feel ready. Start slowly and allow yourself time to adjust.
- Consider how much information you want to share with others about your cancer and its treatment. Be prepared to answer questions about how you are doing. You can share whatever information you wish, including more or less detail. It is also OK to let people know you would rather not talk about yourself.

Radiation Treatment

Radiation treatment may be part of your treatment plan after surgery. Radiation treatment depends on many different factors, such as the type of cancer and response to surgery. Receiving radiation is painless, but over time, the treatment can cause discomfort and can affect your appearance. You will not lose your hair unless you receive radiation to the head.

Skin reactions are a common side effect of radiation treatment. These skin reactions may occur in patches rather than across the entire breast.

The skin treated with radiation may become:

- Pink, red or tan, like a sunburn,
- Flaky, dry or itchy
- Sore and swollen.

During your treatment, you may also feel increasingly tired. This feeling can last for a few weeks or even months after your treatment ends. Your team can talk with you further about managing some of these side effects.

Try to be patient and flexible as you go through radiation treatment. Many of the side effects are temporary and go away after treatment is finished. A long-lasting side effect of radiation treatment is that the breast(s) treated by radiation may become smaller and firmer. Your breast can continue to have slight changes in its size, feel, and skin color well after treatment is completed.

Chemotherapy

You might need chemotherapy before or after breast surgery. When, how much, and how often it is given will depend on the type of cancer you have.

People receive chemotherapy:

- In pill form by mouth,
- Through an IV
- Through an implanted port that is surgically placed under the skin of the chest.

Most women worry or feel nervous about the side effects of chemotherapy, which can have significant short-term effects on the body and affect appearance.

The side effects that women tend to be most concerned about are:

- Hair loss
- Weight changes
- Nausea and vomiting
- Pain
- Fatigue

It is important to understand how to cope with some of the common, short-term and long-term side effects of chemotherapy.

Hair Loss

Surprisingly, women have different reactions to hair loss. Some are devastated, while others may be mildly upset. Some women are even curious about losing their hair to see how it will grow back.

Hair will begin to grow back in about two to three months after completing chemotherapy. Hair may grow back a different color or texture. It often comes in gray and curly. Your hair texture may return to normal over many months.

Wearing a head covering helps some women feel more comfortable, but this is a personal choice. You may choose not to wear a head covering, or only use one sometimes. The decision is yours, and there is no right or wrong choice. Over time, people will get used to your new “look.”

Ways to cope with hair loss include the following:

- Consider wearing wigs, hats and scarves before you begin chemotherapy. Many women choose to buy products ahead of time so they feel more prepared.
- Some women cut their hair short once they start chemotherapy to ease their transition for hair loss.
- Some women choose to shave their head as they begin to lose their hair. This helps them to feel more in control.

Weight Gain

Even after treatment ends, many women find it hard to go back to their previous pre-cancer weight. Chemotherapy can change your metabolism and cause a weight gain of 5 to 10 pounds, even if you eat a healthy diet and are active.

It is OK and normal to be upset by weight changes, but it is also important not to become overly focused or preoccupied with your weight.

Tips that might help you cope with weight gain include the following:

- Wear comfortable clothes and buy larger sizes if needed. The fit and comfort of your clothing is important. Try wearing materials that feel good against your skin.
- Highlight aspects of your appearance that you like by using make up or wearing jewelry or other accessories.
- Eat a balanced diet. Try not to focus too much on eating foods that promote weight loss. Do your best to eat lean meats, fish, fruits and vegetables. Meet with a dietitian or nutritionist for additional help.
- Do activities you enjoy on a regular basis. Find ways to exercise that make your body feel good.

Talk to your doctor before starting any kind of exercise program.

Menopause

Sometimes chemotherapy stops regular menstrual cycles temporarily or permanently. Talk with your doctor about whether your chemotherapy might affect your menstrual cycle.

Going through early menopause can be upsetting because of its own symptoms, such as hot flashes, vaginal dryness and muscle or joint aches.

Other Possible Side Effects

Your fingernails and toenails may become brittle and sore from chemotherapy. They will return to normal once treatment ends. Other side effects, such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, pain and mouth and throat sores, should also go away after chemotherapy ends. Please talk to your health care team about side effects. There are medicines and treatments that can help.

Keep in mind that everyone is different. Try not to worry ahead of time about which side-effects you might experience. Instead, focus on how you are feeling in the present moment. Handle each side effect as it comes and speak openly with your doctor about how your treatment is affecting you.

Lymphedema

Lymphedema is a possible side effect for women who have had radiation treatment or lymph nodes removed during surgery. Lymphedema is swelling, most often in the arms and legs, but it can affect other areas, such as the hands, fingers, chest and back.

Lymphedema happens when the lymphatic system does not drain properly due to disease or injury. The chances of having lymphedema increase when a large number of lymph nodes are removed from the armpit during breast cancer surgery or when radiation is used to treat the lymph nodes around the armpit.

Just because you have had surgery and/or radiation therapy does not mean you will have lymphedema. It affects only a portion of women with breast cancer, but for those who have it, it can be distressing.

Lymphedema can cause swelling that ranges from mild to severe.

Other signs and symptoms include:

- A feeling of tightness, heaviness or fullness in the arm or hand and
- Pain that can limit movement (in more severe cases).

Lymphedema can occur at any time following surgery. It may develop within months of surgery or years after you have completed treatment. Some survivors experience symptoms that come and go over time. It is important to talk with your health care team if you experience any symptoms. While there is no “cure” for lymphedema, early treatment can be more successful in helping you cope with lymphedema.

Tips for Coping with Lymphedema

You can do many things to help cope with and manage lymphedema. Medical treatment can improve movement and reduce pain and swelling in the affected area.

Treatment can include:

- Skin care
- Massage
- Exercise
- Bandaging
- Compression garments
- Medicine
- Surgery

It helps to take part in activities that make you feel good about your body. Try to highlight other aspects of your body that you enjoy and appreciate.

You can also choose to cover the affected arm with a decorative covering or wrap. There are different commercial products available, such as slip-on sleeves with unique designs. Some of these decorative sleeves provide compression to the arm, while others can be used to decorate a compression garment or bandage.

Body Image and Breast Reconstruction

Many women with breast cancer are able to have their breast or breasts reconstructed. The doctor may use breast implants, your own body tissue or both.

Breast reconstruction is not necessary to treat your cancer. Not all patients are candidates for reconstruction. Reconstruction can restore your breast to a more normal shape, size and appearance following the surgery to remove breast cancer. Some women choose to have reconstruction, while others do not. You might choose a different option, such as a breast prosthesis. A prosthesis fits inside the bra to create the look of a breast.

A federal law, the Women's Health and Cancer Rights Act of 1998, requires most group insurance plans to cover breast reconstruction and prostheses following surgical treatment for your cancer. However, it is important to check with your health insurance to determine what is covered by your individual policy.

When are the breasts reconstructed?

When breast reconstruction happens right after breast cancer surgery, it is called immediate reconstruction. When it takes place months or years later, it is called delayed reconstruction. Breast reconstruction can involve many surgeries. This process may take months and up to a year. Usually the first surgery is the most involved; later surgeries are mainly for minor corrections.

Often surgeries are performed on both breasts, even if only one breast had cancer, so that the breasts will look similar. Your health care team will base the reconstruction plan and surgery schedule on your specific treatment needs and body image goals.

At the end of the reconstruction process, some women choose to recreate a nipple and areola (colored part around the nipple). To do this, the surgeon may use your own skin, a portion of your nipple from your other breast or a 3-D tattoo.

Talk with Your Health Care Team About Your Options

Talk with your health care team about any concerns or questions you have about breast reconstruction. When you meet with the surgeon, he or she will give you information about your options.

Some women are disappointed when they learn they are not able to have a certain type of reconstruction or are unable to have reconstruction at all. A number of things determine which surgery options are right for you. Your health care team will explain why some options may not be available.

You do not need to make a decision about your breast reconstruction the first time you meet with the surgeon. Take time and think about your options. Do you want reconstruction? What type of surgery do you want? When do you want to have the surgery? How will the surgery affect the size, shape and feel of your breasts?

Be Realistic About Breast Reconstruction

Reconstructive breast surgery is not the same as cosmetic plastic surgery. Cosmetic plastic surgery takes a normal part of the body and improves it based on a person's wishes. Reconstructive surgery is focused on correcting or restoring appearance to a part of the body that has been damaged from an injury or an illness.

The goal of reconstructive surgery is to help you look as natural and balanced as possible in your clothing. Your reconstructed breasts will never be the same as your natural breasts. The reconstructed breasts may be firmer, have scarring from surgery, may lack sensation or may change in other ways.

You can expect:

- **Scars**
Everyone heals differently, but you will have scars after surgery. They may fade over time, but will not completely go away. The scars may darken four to eight months after surgery but then slowly fade and soften with time.
The area, type and amount of scarring depends on the types of surgeries you have had during treatment. Reconstructive surgery does not remove mastectomy scars. When possible, the doctor will use the same incisions to help reduce scarring.

- If you choose to use your own tissue for reconstruction, you will have scars at the area where the skin is taken (such as from your back, abdomen or buttock). One of the most common reconstruction options uses tissue from the abdomen; this leaves a scar that runs across the abdomen from one side of the hip to the other. The scar is usually low so that underwear or a bathing suit covers it.

Some women develop excess scar tissue called “keloid” scarring at the incision site. If this happens, ask your doctor about possible treatment options.

- **Changes to Breast Symmetry**

The goal of breast reconstruction is to have your breasts look balanced and natural in clothing. Depending on the type of reconstruction you choose, it may take several surgeries and many months – or even longer – to have breasts that are similar in size and shape. You should not expect that your breasts will be perfectly matched at the end of your treatment. Your surgeon will try to make them look as even and as matched as possible.

- **Changes to Breast and Nipple Sensation**

Many things influence whether the breast area will maintain sensation after surgery. Do not expect to have the same sensation in a reconstructed breast as with a natural breast. If you have a nipple recreated during the reconstructive process, your nipple will not have sensation or respond to stimulation like a natural nipple.

Surgery Risks

Your health care team will go over all of the possible risks related to your surgery. Being aware of possible problems before they happen can help you cope with them if they occur.

Although rare, some problems require removal of an implant or tissue that was used to reconstruct the breast. This means you may be without a breast mound for a period of time. If this occurs, you may be able to start the reconstruction process again after waiting a few months. Later, you might be able to have the same type of reconstruction, or you might need a different type.

Sexuality and Intimacy

Your breasts may be a part of what makes you feel feminine and sexy. Therefore, changes to your breasts can change how you see yourself sexually. Treatment can result in other changes, such as early menopause. This may also affect how you view yourself as a sexual person.

Many women fear that their partner will find them less attractive after cancer treatment. They may also fear that treatment will have long-term effects on their sexuality. These concerns are normal and can be overcome.

What is sexuality?

Sexuality is more than just having sex with a partner. Your sexuality is the unique way in which you express your desire for closeness. There is no normal sexuality or sex life because different people value different aspects of intimacy. However, it is normal for sexuality to change with age and with different stages of life.

As you go through breast cancer treatment, your sex life is likely to change at least temporarily. You may not feel as free or spontaneous as before, or you may feel less confident in your body. Side effects may decrease your desire, sexual arousal and/or energy.

The recovery process is different for every woman, and returning to a normal sex life may take some time.

Common Difficulties with Sex after Treatment

- **Loss of breast sensation**
For some women, caressing of the breasts or nipples is an important part of lovemaking. After surgery, your breasts may feel different to you. In some women, the nerve that runs through the breast tissue supplying sensation to the nipple is cut or affected in some way. Even if you did not have a surgery to remove your nipple, the sensation may be different. This could lessen the amount of pleasure you feel when your breasts are touched. Sometimes breast sensation comes back over time, but it is usually not the same as before treatment. Breast sensation may not come back at all for some women.
- **Menopausal symptoms**
Some types of chemotherapy and hormonal therapy lead to early menopause. You may notice changes such as hot flashes and vaginal dryness. These changes make it harder to enjoy physical closeness and sexual activity. You may feel as though you are “getting old” or have other upsetting thoughts about these changes. There are many ways to treat menopausal symptoms caused by chemotherapy and hormonal treatment. Some vaginal moisturizers and lubricants can help relieve discomfort and pain. Be sure to speak to your healthcare provider regarding non-hormonal options to relieve vaginal dryness.
- **Low sexual desire**
If you have been sexually inactive for a period of time, you may have less sexual desire than in the past. Even after you have begun to feel well in other respects, you might find it hard to become interested in sex again. Feeling sexual desire may be especially difficult if you are worried about what sex will be like or what your partner might think of you.

Dealing with Sexual Problems after Treatment

Sexual problems after cancer treatment tend to last for a long time if they are not addressed. One of the most important steps you can take to deal with a sexual problem is to talk about it with your partner. Talking with your partner can help correct misunderstandings and find common ground. However, this can be uncomfortable at first if you are not used to discussing your sex life.

If treatment has affected your ability to feel breast or nipple sensations, you may no longer enjoy having this part of your body touched. If your treatment has only affected one breast, you may wish to continue breast touching on the other side. You might also explore other areas of your body where you enjoy being touched.

You might think about what sex means to you and the role it plays in your life: What have you liked and disliked about sex in the past? What do you miss about your sexuality? How would you define a “good” sex life?

The four tips below may help you with sexual arousal:

- Set aside time with your partner to caress parts of your body other than your breasts.
- Try new positions during sexual activity; this may help if you feel discomfort from surgery scars.
- Tell your partner what feels good and what does not feel good.
- Place your hand on top of your partner’s hand, and guide where you want to be touched and what feels good to you.

Tips for Single Women

If you are single or in a new relationship, you may worry that breast cancer will affect intimacy with a new romantic partner. Although you may be nervous, it is possible to develop a loving relationship and feel confident about being intimate with another person. Finding a supportive partner is important.

Think about the following three tips:

1. Use positive body language. Make eye contact with others, smile and laugh to show someone you enjoy his or her company.
2. Position your body in ways that make you feel secure and comfortable. Try to sit or stand in ways that make you feel sexy and confident.
3. Try to maintain a sense of humor and a strong attitude. If you feel uncomfortable during intimate moments, speak up. If you feel “out of practice,” laugh about it and become intimate with your new partner slowly.

Many single women are not sure when to tell a new partner about their cancer history. One suggestion is to tell your partner after you have gotten to know one another, but before you become physically intimate. Whatever you choose, pick a comfortable time and a private place. Tell your partner only what you are comfortable discussing at first. Allow your partner to ask questions, and then ask questions about what he or she is feeling. Be open and honest.

While a partner can provide wonderful support and guidance throughout your recovery process, you are responsible for your own self-confidence. Only you can allow yourself to feel truly attractive and desirable.

Tips for Women in a Relationship

If you are in a serious relationship or are married, you and your partner may feel tension about sex and intimacy. Your partner may also have a hard time adjusting to your body changes. Talk about these concerns with each other, and try to make positive changes to your sex life if needed.

Think about the following tips:

- Share your feelings and concerns. Don't assume you know what your partner is thinking or feeling. Avoid blaming and making accusations. Rather than say, "You never touch me anymore," instead try, "I miss the way we used to touch."
- If you and your partner are not having sex, you should continue other forms of affection and intimacy. For example, go on dates, cuddle, kiss, hold hands and talk. Try to plan intimate activities where there is no pressure for sex.
- When you are ready to have sex again, you may need more time to get "in the mood." If you are feeling unattractive or uneasy, try wearing something that makes you feel sexy or comfortable, such as your favorite lingerie or nightgown.
- Set aside a time when you can be relaxed and are unlikely to have interruptions.
- Pick a time of day when you have the most energy and be patient with one another. Whether you and your partner have been together for one year or 30 years, rebuilding intimacy can be a long, slow process.
- Deal with one issue at a time, and do not assume you know the other person's feelings.

Talk with Your Health Care Team about Sexual Problems

Your health care team can direct you to specialists who have knowledge and training in helping people with sexual desire, arousal and painful intercourse. You may benefit from supportive counseling, vaginal lubricants and/or moisturizers, medicines or medical devices.

Sexuality is an important part of your overall health and well-being. It deserves attention and proper care. If you would like more information about Sexuality and Intimacy, please reach out to your health care team for available resources.

Improving Body Image

How often do you judge, criticize or complain about your body? If you are like most women, you do this more than you would like. You may voice these complaints in your head or aloud to others. You may have had negative thoughts and feelings about your body long before breast cancer. These thoughts may be hard to control or change. Breast cancer and its treatment may have strained your relationship with your body even more.

Look at the demands and expectations you are placing on your body. Ask yourself whether you are being realistic and fair.

- Do you strive to look like other women who have a different body type?
- Do you strive to look the way you did five or 10 years ago?
- Are you placing unrealistic demands on your body to look the way it did before having breast cancer?

Doing any of these things can increase the chance that you will feel dissatisfied with your body.

7 Suggestions on How to Improve Your Relationship with Your Body

1. Be kind to yourself when having negative thoughts and feelings about your body. It is OK to not like things about the way you look sometimes.
2. Even though you accept your body, you do not have to like everything about your body or feel satisfied with the way you look. Having a healthy body image means that you are aware of what you like and dislike but are willing to accept yourself “as is.”
3. Make an effort to replace critical thoughts about your body with neutral and objective statements about the way you look.
 - Ask yourself, “Is there a way I can think or say things differently so that I am more fair and accurate?” For example, instead of “My breasts look abnormal,” you could say, “I have scars on my breasts from surgery. One breast is smaller, but my friends cannot tell the difference. I must notice changes more than other people do.”
4. Find ways to exercise and make your body feel good
 - Plan exercise for a time when you are more likely to do it.
 - If you have certain physical limits due to treatment or recovery, do things that are comfortable and easy. For example, try light stretching, beginners’ yoga or walking. You might already be doing things to help promote fitness and health, such as physical therapy and eating a healthy diet.
 - Exercise can help you manage stress and improve your mood.
5. Do activities that enhance your senses. This is called sensory awareness and can include massage, enjoying nature, taking a bath, wearing soft or silky clothing and being intimate with a loved one.
6. Take time to focus on your clothing, hair, make-up and jewelry; this can be fun and enjoyable. If this takes up too much time during your day or causes you stress, place more emphasis on other activities.
7. Recognize your efforts. Improving your body image can be challenging. Compliment yourself for the ways you become more accepting of your body.

Consider these questions:

- In what ways can you spend more time trying to nurture and appreciate your body?
- In what ways can you compliment your body?
- What kinds of things can you do to help yourself feel better about your body?

Increasing Your Confidence

At some point, many people feel self-conscious about the way they look and worry about what other people think. Having breast cancer can increase the discomfort you feel in social situations, particularly during the early stages of your recovery from treatment.

You may find that you worry about the following:

- What are other people thinking about how I look?
- How much are they going to stare at my breasts or notice changes to my breasts?
- What are they going to ask me? How will I respond?

Try the following tips to feel better when spending time with others:

- Resume social activities as soon as you are physically able to do so. The longer you wait to be around other people, the more anxious you may feel. Start with a small group of close family and friends. When you feel comfortable, slowly increase the contact you have with others in different settings.
- Use nonverbal communication, such as eye contact, smiling, nodding your head and having good posture to help you build more confidence.
- When it comes to your cancer and treatment, discuss only what makes you feel comfortable. Direct the conversation away from yourself, ask about the other person, change the topic or discuss a shared interest.
- Do not assume what other people are thinking or how they feel about you. You cannot read people's minds, so you have no way of knowing what they are thinking about your appearance, if they are thinking about it at all.
- Your appearance is more of a concern to you than it is to other people. You might focus on how you look while other people are busy feeling self-conscious about themselves.
- The way you behave, not the way you look, influences people.
- Make the most of how you present yourself and your strengths. Wear clothes that make your body feel good. Enhance the physical features of your body with clothing, accessories and/or make-up.
- Use humor to manage uncomfortable or awkward situations.
- Learn from situations that do not go well. Consider how you might approach things differently in the future.
- Try volunteering as a way to get involved in social situations and in the community. Being able to help and support others can be healing and fulfilling.

Maintaining a Healthy Body Image

Breast cancer and its treatment can result in long-lasting changes to your body and appearance. It is not surprising that some women experience difficulties coping with these changes long after treatment is completed. For some women, body image issues may not even arise until after treatment is completed.

Try not to be too discouraged if you have concerns about changes to your body long after you have completed treatment. It is never too late to work at having a better relationship with your body.

Achieving a Healthy Body Image Is a Journey, Not a Destination

With any journey, there are twists, turns, highs and lows. Do not expect to have the best possible body image at all times. Achieving a healthy body image requires patience, energy and effort.

Things to remember throughout your recovery process:

- Have compassion for yourself.
- Work at setting realistic goals, and adjust your expectations as needed.
- Find things that you like about your body.
- Engage in activities that give your body pleasure and make you feel good.

If you find yourself struggling, you may want to talk with a psychologist or counselor about your concerns. This added support can be helpful during treatment, whether you have just been diagnosed, are in active treatment, or are having problems post-treatment

Resources

Social Work

<http://www.baptistmdanderson.com>

904-202-7300

The Department of Social Work provides short-term individual or family counseling free of charge. They also offer ongoing support groups for patients and family members. Clinical social workers can also assist you in identifying resources in your community for further support.

Other Resources

ABCD: After Breast Cancer Diagnosis

<http://www.abcdbreastcancersupport.org>

800-997-4121

FREE personalized, one-to-one support for those affected by breast cancer. Trained and professionally supported volunteer survivors and co-survivors help those dealing with breast cancer, from the newly diagnosed to those in treatment and beyond.

American Cancer Society (ACS)

www.cancer.org

800-277-2345

The ACS offers access to a breadth of cancer information and educational materials through their website, publications and toll-free information line. They also provide support groups for cancer survivors and their family members both online and in local communities across the country.

American Society of Plastic Surgeons

www.plasticsurgery.org

847-228-9900

The patient and consumer section of the website provides before and after photos, frequently asked questions and other educational information.

Cancer.net

www.cancer.net

571-483-1780 or 888-651-3038

This patient information website of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) provides timely oncologist-approved information to help patients and families make informed health care decisions. Specific information on coping with emotional and physical matters is available.

The Cancer Support Community

www.cancersupportcommunity.org

888-793-9355 or 202-659-9709

The Cancer Support Community has centers around the county that offer special groups and wellness classes for cancer survivors and family members, and some online support groups. Additional resources related to relaxation/visualization, stress management, exercise and healing are also available.

LIVESTrong Foundation

www.livestrong.org

855-220-7777

This nonprofit organization provides practical information and tools to help people with cancer live life on their own terms. Specific information on coping with physical and emotional effects of cancer and practical tips on adapting to body image changes are available.

Look Good . . . Feel Better

www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org

800-395-5665

The Look Good . . . Feel Better program is a free program designed by the ACS to help women offset appearance-related changes from cancer treatment. The program provides education on beauty techniques to help enhance appearance and self-image during treatment. Small group programs, one-on-one salon consultations and self-help materials are available. Self-help materials are also available for men coping with appearance-related changes free of charge.

National Cancer Institute, Cancer Information Service

www.cancer.gov

800-422-6237

This service provides education about cancer prevention, risk factors, early detection, symptoms, diagnosis and treatment. It includes information specialists that can answer questions by telephone, TTY, instant messaging and email. They also provide printed and electronic NCI publications.

National Lymphedema Network and Hotline

www.lymphnet.org

800-541-3259

The National Lymphedema network provides patients with information on the prevention and management of primary and secondary lymphedema.

Shop Well with You

www.shopwellwithyou.org

800-799-6790

The Shop Well with You website offers a number of resources, including articles on body image and information on clothing-specific needs of cancer survivors. The site provides general tips on fabrics, styles and cuts that offer the most comfort for specific physical conditions, including mastectomy, lymphedema and post-surgical recovery. In addition, contact information is provided for stores, catalogs and online retailers that carry these clothing items.

Susan G. Komen for the Cure

www.komen.org

877-465-6636

This is a grassroots network of breast cancer survivors and activists that provides up-to-date information on breast cancer, a helpline and support for breast cancer research.

Tender Loving Care (TLC)

www.tlccatalog.org

800-850-9445

This “magalog” (magazine/catalog) combines helpful articles and information with products for women coping with cancer treatment. TLC offers wigs, mastectomy forms and products, and a large selection of hats and head coverings.