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Sex after prostate cancer



Therapists ask patients post-treatment to redefine "sex." (Kristian Sekulic/Getty Images)

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"Give it to me straight, doc." That's what urologists say the patient asks when he gets his prostate cancer diagnosis. "Am I going to have sex again?"

The patient hears that prostate cancer is common and can be cured when caught early. But many a patient jumps ahead to the post-treatment side effects, especially incontinence and the one that threatens his very masculinity — erectile dysfunction.

So averse are men to ED, in fact, that "some choose to not have surgery," even though the side effect is often temporary, said Dr. Stuart Holden, a urologist and medical director of the Santa Monica, Calif.-based Prostate Cancer Foundation.

When the doctor gets to the worst-case scenario of post-treatment, like urine leakage during sex, some men go into la-la-la, I'm-not-listening mode.

"Their wives say, 'He'll have the surgery,' because the women want them to see their grandkids grow up," Holden said. "But for some men, the quality of life is more important than the quantity."

Despair is a common reaction, said Paul Nelson, a Hartford, Conn., teacher who became a clinical sexuality educator and founded the Erectile Dysfunction Foundation after surviving prostate cancer.

"I tell them they're going to be OK, that they will have sex again, but it'll be different, and it may not be vaginal intercourse," he said. "For me, (ED) pills worked, but there are other options."

Depending on a man's age and health, prostate cancer treatment is usually surveillance (doctor-speak for "Let's keep an eye on it"), radiation or surgical removal of the prostate (prostatectomy).

It's no wonder treatment causes side effects, because "the prostate is in the middle of a lot of action — urinary and sexual," said Andrew Siegel, a Hackensack, N.J., urologist and author of "Male Pelvic Fitness: Optimizing Sexual and Urinary Health." Radiation and surgery easily damage nerves that stimulate the penis muscles to relax, thereby allowing blood to rush in and cause an erection.

Doctors credit Dr. Patrick Walsh of Johns Hopkins University for popularizing "nerve-sparing" surgery, which improves the chances of sexual functioning afterward.

Sex, reinvented

Therapists who work with patients post-treatment ask them to redefine "sex."

"After surgery, you can have an orgasm and erection, but not ejaculation because the prostate is gone, and it makes the semen," Holden explained. "Orgasm is a brain thing, so you can have an orgasm even if you're paralyzed from the waist down."

Ability to cope varies, he said. "I've seen men tie little notes to their penises before surgery that tell me, 'Treat it like it's your own,'" he said.

Changing men's sex lives triggers "an internal crisis," said John Beiter, a psychologist and sex therapist in Troy, Mich. "Men tend to have a skewed view of sex, thanks to porn and what other guys brag about doing (but don't really do)."

He encourages couples to take the Beiter Sexuality Preference Indicator at bspitest.com, an online test, then discuss how their answers differ. "This may be the first time they've really talked about sex," he said. "Many end up closer than they were before."

Rich London, of Charlotte, N.C., and his wife just celebrated their 28th wedding anniversary, 11 years after his surgery. "I just wanted it out," he said of his cancerous prostate. After surgery, he tried ED drugs but didn't like the side effects. "So my wife and I figured out ways to please each other."

Help on the way

The best "cure" for ED is time. Most men see an improvement within a year, after nerves heal.

To strengthen pelvic muscles for post-surgical sex, Nelson suggests starting exercises before treatment. He sends patients home with Siegel's book and a DVD, "Private Gym," that spells out how and why exercises help. The "use it or lose it" rule does apply, he said, just as it does to other muscles.

No matter the side effects, "Take care of the cancer first," Nelson said. "You may have sexual problems after the treatment, but you'll have no sex if you're dead."

'Give it to me straight, doc': Patients want the real dope on post-prostate cancer treatment.

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