

## INFORMATION SHEET

# Sexual Intimacy



Sexual intimacy is a broad term and means much more than sexual intercourse. It can be expressed as any form of physical closeness and tenderness including caressing, massage, cuddling and even hand holding.

As some people become less well, they may find there is less interest and desire for physical sexual intimacy with a partner / loved one. With so much going on and so many things to worry about, sexual intimacy may take a back seat. The ability to give and receive love physically and emotionally is an important aspect of being human and can be important to maintain quality of life.

Everyone is different, every couple is unique and the intimate needs of every couple and every person are also unique. Some people may be accepting of putting sexual desires on hold while their energy is low and / or they are dealing with physical symptoms. However, some find that maintaining sexual intimacy with their partner is important to their sense of wellbeing.

If you would like further information, please feel free to discuss this with your Care Coordinator.

## Challenges to sexual intimacy for the person living with a life-limiting illness

These may include:

- Issues such as change in roles, change in body and self-image, anxiety and depression.
- Physical symptoms and or side effect of treatment can also alter sexual functioning such as fatigue, nausea, pain, oedema and scarring, shortness of breath.
- Fear of pain is often a major factor.
- Comfortable physical positioning.

*"Do I think about sex? Of course I do! I'm still human. But sex isn't something my husband would want to do with me anymore. Ever since I got this colostomy bag, anyway." (64-year-old woman with bowel cancer)*

- Feelings of fatigue and emotional turmoil.
- Changes in physical appearance of loved one.
- Fear of causing harm or hurting their loved one.

*"She keeps on worrying about that colostomy bag. I'm not worried about it. Besides, there are lots of things we can do to be together, I mean sexually, that won't put me anywhere near it." (Partner of a 64-year-old woman with bowel cancer)*



*The key to managing the challenges to your sexual intimacy is communication.*

## Challenges to sexual intimacy for the partner of a person facing a life-limiting illness

These may include:

- Feelings of guilt and worry that their loved one is too unwell to enjoy sexual intimacy.

## Managing the challenges to sexual intimacy

The key to managing the challenges to your sexual intimacy is communication. Set aside some time when the two of you can be alone.

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Sometimes finding privacy can be difficult with well-meaning family, friends and health professionals visiting frequently. You may need to be proactive with this.

Once you have managed to get some privacy, let the conversation begin. Start by asking each other open-ended questions about each other's physical needs, desires and wishes. Talk openly about any concerns or fears. It may be helpful to have a pen and paper handy and write down any questions that come up that you want to ask your healthcare provider. Some examples of questions to ask each other include:

- What type of intimacy is most important to you?
- What kind of touch would feel the best to you?
- How can I best fulfill your physical and emotional needs?
- What concerns you the most about physical intimacy or sex?

Give each other time to express your feelings and try to be open-minded. It is easy to take things personally when talking about sex and it is even easier to become highly emotional when you are already stressed. If you find you need additional help, ask your hospice team.

### Other helpful strategies:

- Timing of pain relief may need to be altered to provide pain control and avoid sedation when a couple wants to be sexual. Opioids may interfere with arousal which can also be counterproductive.
- Fatigue is common so try and use a time of day when you are most rested. This may mean prioritizing other activities.



*Whatever the couple or individual chooses to do is right and appropriate for them.*

- Using a bronchodilator or inhaler before sexual activity may be helpful for those short of breath. Use extra pillows to get a more upright position to make breathing easier.
- Experimenting with positions may aid comfort.
- Use of vaginal lubricant may be helpful and remember care with hygiene.
- Sensitivity with the presence of a catheter is likely to be needed and further information is available online or talk to your health professional.

It is important to emphasize that there is no right or wrong way to express sexual intimacy with a life-limiting illness. Whatever the couple or individual chooses to do is right and appropriate for them. It is not uncommon for couples to find that as the illness progresses their closeness is enhanced, and they are able to express themselves in ways that they have not for many years.