

■ CNE Article

# Women's Poorer Satisfaction With Their Sex Lives Following Gynecologic Cancer Treatment

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Gynecologic cancer treatment can lead to anatomical changes in the genitalia that may impair sexual response. As a result, the authors aimed to assess women's self-perceptions of their sex lives following gynecologic cancer treatment and the impact of such treatment on sexual function. Thirty sexually active women were examined. At the first meeting with a physician sex therapist, women were asked about their satisfaction with their sexual activities prior to and after gynecologic cancer treatment, either with a partner or alone, and how many times per month they had sexual intercourse prior to the cancer diagnosis and after treatment. Women reported significantly worse sex lives and a significantly lower frequency of sexual relations following cancer treatment. All participants reported pain on vaginal penetration and feeling uncomfortable in discussing their sexual difficulties with the oncologist. The findings show that women experienced impaired sexual function, as well as poorer quality of sexual function, following gynecologic cancer treatment. Nurses should provide basic guidelines about sexual function to all patients who undergo treatment for gynecologic cancer.

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**D**iagnosis of gynecologic cancer can have a strong negative psychological impact (Levin et al., 2010) and lead to reduced self-esteem, negative feelings about one's own body, relationship difficulties, perceived loss of sexual attractiveness, and other issues (Crouch, 1999; Tang, Lai, & Chung, 2010). That situation may be aggravated by anatomical changes caused by surgical treatment, as well as those resulting from radiotherapy (Wenzel et al., 2005). Gynecologic cancer treatments also can disrupt the synthesis and action of sex steroids, neurotransmitters, and neuropeptides that are involved in sexual function (Lara, Rosa e Silva, Romao, & Junqueira, 2008; Lara et al., 2009), thus impairing the sexual response. In fact, women with gynecologic cancers often present with psychological problems and sexual dysfunctions that compromise their quality of life (Kim et al., 2010; Reis, Beji, & Coskun, 2010).

Previous research has estimated that sexual dysfunction occurs in about 50% of women with gynecologic cancer (Audette & Waterman, 2010) and is common particularly in women treated for locally advanced cancer of the cervix, who may experience fi-

brosis and narrowing of the vagina. Those patients also may have impaired innervation of the genitalia (Plotti, Calcagno, Sansone, Angioli, & Panici, 2010), resulting in reduced pleasure sensitivity and negative feelings about sex (Plotti et al., 2011). In addition, pain during coitus is common (Bergmark, Avall-Lundqvist, Dickman, Henningsohn, & Steineck, 1999) because of the atrophy caused by the hypoestrogenism that follows surgical ablation of the ovaries, radiotherapy, or chemotherapy. A controlled study of 50 women who underwent surgery for gynecologic cancer reported a 60% increase in complaints about sexual relations, mainly reduced desire and dyspareunia because of dryness, shortening, and decreased elasticity of the vagina following surgery (Aerts, Enzlin, Verhaeghe, Vergote, & Amant, 2009). Those complaints were common particularly in patients who underwent more radical surgeries (Serati et al., 2009).

Earlier detection of gynecologic cancer and advances in neoadjuvant treatment have led to the use of less radical surgery and significantly increased survival rates (Hwang et al., 2001). Therefore, a growing need exists to prevent and address sexual complaints in those patients to improve their quality of life (Ratner, Foran,