

# Intimacy & Sexual Wellness With Prostate Cancer

## A Guide for Patients and Their Partners



Intimacy and sexual wellness are important parts of overall health and quality of life. Feeling close and cared for can support your emotional health during and after cancer treatment.



**Intimacy** means feeling close and cared for. This can include touch, affection, kind words, and trust.



**Sexual wellness** means feeling comfortable and healthy with your body, sexual feelings, and relationships — at any stage of life.



**Sexual health** includes both intimacy and sexual wellness. It is a positive, respectful approach to sexuality and relationships. It allows you to have safe and comfortable experiences.

Prostate cancer and its treatments can affect sexual health in many ways. You may notice changes in erections (when the penis gets hard), desire, orgasm, or energy. You may also feel worry, sadness, or frustration. These changes can affect relationships, confidence, and how you feel about your body.

If you are experiencing these concerns, you are not alone. Sexual health changes are very common with prostate cancer. The good news is that support, treatments, and coping tips are available. Many people and couples find new ways to stay close and keep intimacy over time.



## WHAT IS PROSTATE CANCER?

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The prostate is a small gland found below the bladder in people assigned male at birth. It helps make semen (the fluid that carries sperm). Prostate cancer happens when cells in the prostate grow out of control. Many prostate cancers grow slowly, and treatment options are often very effective.



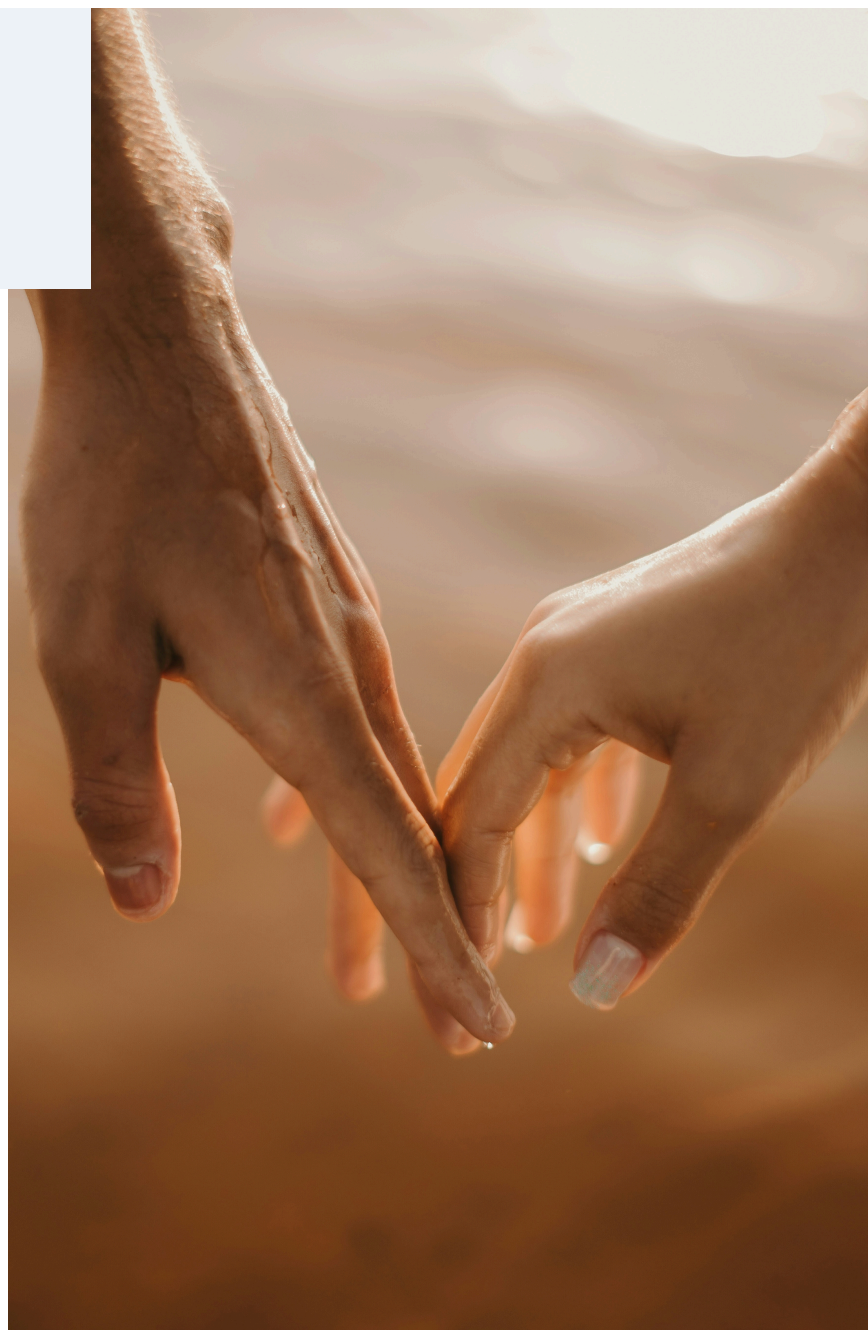
For more information about prostate cancer, visit [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Prostate-Cancer](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Prostate-Cancer).



### What Do We Mean by Intimacy and Sexual Wellness?

Intimacy is about feeling emotionally and physically close to another person. It does not only mean sex. For many people and couples, intimacy looks different at different stages of life — especially during illness, treatment, recovery, or times of stress. Changes in energy, comfort, body image, or desire are common. These changes do not mean that closeness or connection has to end.

Sexual wellness includes feeling comfortable, respected, and connected in your body and in your relationships. Even if sexual activity changes or pauses, intimacy can continue in meaningful ways. Honest and open communication is key — talking about feelings, needs, concerns, and boundaries helps build trust and strengthens emotional connection. Many couples discover new ways to feel close that are just as fulfilling as before.





During and after a prostate cancer diagnosis, intimacy can be redefined to include:

- Touch, affection, and closeness, such as gentle hugs, holding hands, or sitting close together
- Shared quiet time, like watching a movie, listening to music, or simply being present together
- Emotional connection, including talking, writing notes, laughing, sharing memories, or expressing appreciation
- Non-sexual physical contact, such as cuddling, massage, or comforting touch
- Acts of care and support, like checking in on each other, helping with daily tasks, or showing kindness

“Something as simple as my partner putting her hand on my arm felt incredibly intimate. I didn’t realize connection could look like that.”

*Jeff, prostate cancer patient advocate*

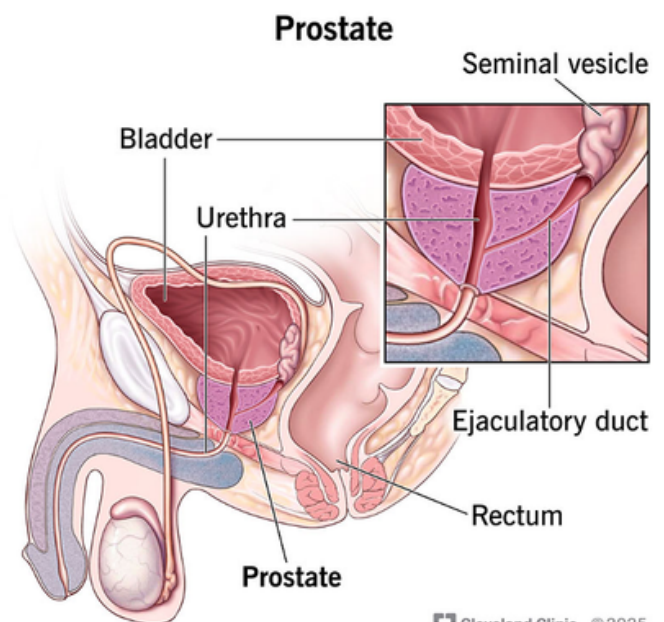
It’s also important to adjust expectations over time. Recovery and healing do not always happen in a straight line, and needs may change from day to day. Giving yourself and your partner permission to move at a comfortable pace can reduce pressure and help maintain closeness. With patience, communication, and openness, intimacy can continue to grow and evolve in ways that feel meaningful and supportive for both partners.

## HOW PROSTATE CANCER MAY AFFECT SEXUAL HEALTH

Understanding how the body works can help explain why sexual changes may happen. Because the nerves and blood vessels involved in sexual function are very close to the prostate, they can be affected by cancer or by treatments.

### How Sexual Function Works

- **The prostate** helps make semen (the fluid that carries sperm).
- **Nerves next to the prostate** help control erections or how the penis gets hard.
- **Blood vessels** allow blood to flow into the penis to create an erection.
- **Testosterone**, a hormone, supports sexual desire (also called libido).



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## HOW TREATMENT MAY IMPACT SEXUAL HEALTH

Prostate cancer treatments can affect sexual health in different ways. Not everyone has the same side effects. Some changes are short term, while others may last longer. The effects depend on:

- The type of treatment you receive - Hormone treatment with ADT (androgen deprivation therapy) will cause sexual health side effects in nearly all patients.
- Your age and overall health
- Whether you had sexual concerns before treatment
- How your body heals over time



We were given so much information all at once — diagnosis, treatment, next steps — that the impact on sexual health just got lost. We didn't really understand what was coming."

***Ruth, prostate cancer partner and caregiver***

### Questions to Ask Your Care Team

Your questions matter, and your care team is there to support you and provide clear answers. Bringing a list of questions can help ensure your concerns are addressed and that you leave the appointment feeling informed and confident. Consider asking:



How will prostate cancer treatment affect my sex life?
What sexual side effects should I expect?
How can I plan ahead for sexual side effects? Will planning ahead help avoid issues?
Will I still have sexual desire or erections?
How will treatment affect fertility?
How do I talk to my partner about changes?
How long might recovery take?
Are there medications or devices that can help? How soon should I use these?
Is it normal to feel anxious, sad, or frustrated?
Who on my care team can help with sexual health concerns?
Are counseling or support programs available?

## COMMON PHYSICAL CHANGES

During and after treatment for prostate cancer, you may notice one or more of the following changes. These physical changes are medical side effects — not personal failures.

<b>Erectile dysfunction (ED)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Trouble getting or keeping an erection<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Very common after surgery or radiation</li><li>◦ Caused by changes in nerves and blood flow</li><li>◦ May improve slowly over time</li></ul></li><li>• Mild shortening of the penis</li></ul>
<b>Changes in ejaculation or orgasm</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Little or no semen after surgery</li><li>• Orgasms (sexual climax) may feel different</li><li>• Sensation (how sex or orgasms feel) may be weaker or delayed</li></ul>
<b>Reduced sexual desire (libido)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Less interest in sex<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◦ Often linked to hormone therapy, fatigue, or stress</li></ul></li></ul>
<b>Fatigue or pain</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Low energy can reduce interest in intimacy</li><li>• Pain or discomfort may affect desire or comfort</li></ul>
<b>Hormonal changes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hormone therapy lowers testosterone</li><li>• Can cause hot flashes, mood changes, and low libido</li><li>• Can cause weight gain, body hair loss, muscle loss, enlarged/tender breast tissue</li></ul>



I still had desire in my mind, but my body didn't respond. I didn't understand that desire and libido are different things when it comes to getting an erection."

*Jeff, prostate cancer patient advocate*

## EMOTIONAL & MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT

Sexual changes can affect more than just your body — they can also affect how you feel emotionally. Many people experience a wide range of emotions when changes occur, and these reactions are normal. You may notice shifts in mood, confidence, or how you relate to yourself or others. These experiences can be temporary or ongoing, and everyone responds differently.

### You may experience:

- Anxiety or depression, including worry about sexual changes, frustration, or sadness
- Changes in body image, sense of self, or self-esteem, such as feeling less confident or unsure about your body
- Feelings of loss or grief, especially if things feel different than before
- Stress related to intimacy or relationships, including concerns about communication, closeness, or connection
- Brain fog or memory issues

If these feelings become overwhelming or don't improve over time, it can be helpful to talk with a member of your care team or a mental health professional. Support is available, and addressing emotional well-being is an important part of overall health.

“

It affects how you see yourself — your identity, your sense of masculinity. That part caught me completely off guard.”

*Jeff, prostate cancer patient advocate*

### Mental Health is Part of Cancer Care

Feeling overwhelmed, sad, or anxious is common with prostate cancer. Support from counselors, social workers, or support groups can help you cope and feel less alone. Visit [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Coping-Mental-Health-Concerns](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Coping-Mental-Health-Concerns).





## WHAT YOU CAN DO

There are many ways to manage symptoms, support recovery, and improve intimacy.

<p><b>Managing symptoms</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk with your care team about what to expect and how to manage symptoms proactively (before treatment starts).</li> <li>• Use medications or devices as prescribed, such as ED medications or vacuum devices.</li> <li>• Try exercises for your pelvic floor (group of muscles at the bottom of your pelvis) or physical therapy, if recommended.</li> <li>• Track changes and recovery to share with your care team.</li> <li>• Do not stop or start treatments without talking to your care team.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Nutrition and daily routines</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eat a balanced diet to support energy and healing.</li> <li>• Include light to moderate exercise if approved by your doctor — such as resistance training, walking, and yoga.</li> <li>• Prioritize sleep to reduce fatigue and improve mood.</li> <li>• Maintain healthy routines to support both physical and sexual health.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Emotional coping</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice stress relief techniques, such as deep breathing, mindfulness, or journaling.</li> <li>• Consider counseling for anxiety, depression, or sexual concerns.</li> <li>• Join support groups to share experiences and learn from others.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Communication tips</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk openly with your partner about concerns and needs.</li> <li>• Share fears, hopes, and expectations.</li> <li>• Be patient with yourself and your partner.</li> <li>• Set realistic goals for intimacy and sexual activity.</li> </ul>

## WORKING WITH YOUR CARE TEAM

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You do not have to manage sexual health concerns alone. If sexual health is important to you, say so. Your care team wants to help. **There may not be one clear person on your care team to talk to about sexual health concerns. Don't let this stand in the way of advocating for yourself and your needs.** Start with trusted members of your care team, and ask for referrals.

Here are key team members and how they can help:

- **Urologists** – Manage prostate health, surgery, and recovery
- **Oncologists** – Oversee cancer treatment and side effects
- **Nurses** – Provide education, answer questions, and coordinate care
- **Sexual health specialists** – Offer strategies, devices, and therapies; may include an ED clinic or specialist
- **Physical therapists** – Can help with pelvic floor exercises or other physical therapy
- **Mental health professionals** – Support coping, mood, and relationship concerns
- **Palliative care specialists** – Focus on relieving symptoms, pain, and stress to improve quality of life — available as early as diagnosis and throughout the cancer experience



## TIPS FOR GETTING SUPPORT

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Many people find it hard to ask for help. You may feel shy, embarrassed, or uncomfortable talking about sex. Family or personal beliefs may make it hard. Your care team members may not bring up sexual health. And you may not have easy access to the right specialists.

Sexual health challenges with prostate cancer are **common and manageable**. They should not be hidden under the broad term “quality of life.” Your concerns are valid and important. It is okay to bring up sexual health concerns. Your care team deals with these challenges all the time. You can start the conversation. You deserve care that supports your whole self.



## HERE ARE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE:

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- Talk openly with your care team. Say what is hard and what you need.
- Talk with your partner. Share your feelings, worries, and hopes.
- Ask to see a specialist.
- Ask for support services, classes, or handouts.
- Ask questions. Look for clear, trusted information.
- Get support for your emotions and sexual health. This can include a counselor or support group.

## SUPPORT FOR PARTNERS AND LOVED ONES

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When your partner has prostate cancer, your relationship may feel different. You may have worries, stress, or even disagreements. These feelings are normal and valid. You are not alone, and there are supports that can help. Common challenges include:



Changes in sexual activity or closeness – Even when love and care remain strong, changes in closeness can feel confusing or painful for you or your loved one.



Less time or energy to connect – Medical appointments, fatigue, or daily responsibilities can leave little time or energy for meaningful connection.



Stress, worry, or frustration – Concerns about your partner's health, the future, or day-to-day demands can lead to ongoing stress.



Feelings of rejection or loss – Changes in communication or intimacy may sometimes feel personal, even when they are not.



Shifting roles from romantic partner to caregiver – Balancing caregiving responsibilities with maintaining a sense of partnership can be challenging.



Uncertainty about how to support each other – You may want to help but not know what your partner needs — or your partner may struggle to express it.

Even as things change, it is still possible to maintain closeness and feel connected to your loved one. Open communication and finding new ways to connect can help both partners feel supported. Cancer affects relationships, but it can also strengthen them. Helpful steps include:

- Communicating openly and often
- Attending appointments when possible
- Learning together about side effects and recovery
- Considering couples counseling, support groups, or individual counseling

“

Sexual changes don't just affect the patient. They affect the relationship. It's important to talk openly about these changes. We have grown closer and found new ways to connect.”

*Ruth, prostate cancer partner and caregiver*



## SUPPORT FOR CAREGIVERS

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At times, caregivers may find that they put their own needs aside as they care for someone else. You might not even notice it happening. Caregiver stress and burnout are very real and common. There are programs and services that can help you, as you take care of your loved one with cancer.

Learn more at

[www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Caregivers](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Caregivers).



# RESOURCES

## PROSTATE CANCER AND CAREGIVER RESOURCES

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### **Cancer Support Community**

CSC-867-5309 (or outside the U.S., toll-free 888-793-9355)

[www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Prostate-Cancer](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Prostate-Cancer)

[www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Caregivers](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Caregivers)

### **National Alliance for Caregiving**

[www.Caregiving.org](http://www.Caregiving.org)

### **ZERO Prostate Cancer**

[ZEROCancer.org/Stay-Informed/Sexual-Health](http://ZEROCancer.org/Stay-Informed/Sexual-Health)

### **The Prostate Health Podcast**

[www.ProstateHealthPodcast.com/57-Reclaiming-Sexual-Health-After-Prostate-Cancer-Jeffrey-Albaugh-ph-d-aprn-cucns/](http://www.ProstateHealthPodcast.com/57-Reclaiming-Sexual-Health-After-Prostate-Cancer-Jeffrey-Albaugh-ph-d-aprn-cucns/)

### **National Cancer Institute**

[www.Cancer.gov/Types/Prostate](http://www.Cancer.gov/Types/Prostate)

### **American Cancer Society**

[www.Cancer.org/Cancer/Types/Prostate-Cancer.html](http://www.Cancer.org/Cancer/Types/Prostate-Cancer.html)



## Cancer Support Community Resources

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**Cancer Support Helpline®** — Have questions, concerns, or looking for resources? Call CSC's toll-free Cancer Support Helpline at CSC-867-5309 (or outside the U.S., toll-free 888-793-9355), available in 200 languages.

**Open to Options®** — Preparing for your next appointment? Our trained specialists can help you create a list of questions to share with your doctor. Make an appointment by calling CSC-867-5309 or by contacting your local CSC or Gilda's Club.

**Frankly Speaking About Cancer®** — Trusted information for cancer patients and their loved ones is available through publications, online, and in-person programs.

**Services at Local CSCs and Gilda's Clubs** — With the help of over 200 locations, in 50 markets, CSC and Gilda's Club centers provide services free of charge to people impacted by cancer. Attend support groups, educational sessions, wellness programs, and more  
**[www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/FindLocation](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/FindLocation)**.

**Cancer Experience Registry®** — Help others by sharing your cancer patient or cancer caregiver experience via survey at **[www.CancerExperienceRegistry.org](http://www.CancerExperienceRegistry.org)**.

**MyLifeLine®** — CSC's secure, online community welcomes anyone impacted by cancer to easily connect with community to reduce stress, anxiety, and isolation. Create a personal network site and invite friends & family to follow your journey. And participate in our discussion forums any time of day to meet others like you who understand what you are experiencing. Join now at **[www.MyLifeLine.org](http://www.MyLifeLine.org)**.

**Grassroots Network** — Make sure your voice is heard by federal and state policy makers on issues affecting cancer patients and survivors by joining our Network at **[www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Become-Advocate](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Become-Advocate)**.

This publication is available to download and print yourself at **[www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Prostate-Cancer](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Prostate-Cancer)**.

For print copies of this publication or other information about coping with cancer, visit **[Orders.CancerSupportCommunity.org](http://Orders.CancerSupportCommunity.org)**.

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Prostate Cancer Caregiving Program Partner:



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