Women's Sexual Health after Transplant

Celebrating a Second Chance at Life Survivorship Symposium

April 30 - May 6, 2022

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Women’s Sexual Health after Transplant

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Celebrating a Second Chance at Life Survivorship Symposium May 2, 2022
Learning Objectives

• The incidence and type of sexual difficulties in women following hematopoietic cell transplant
• The impact of these on quality of life
• Techniques and therapies available for improving quality of sexual experiences
• The cause of pain during sex after transplant and possible treatment strategies

Nearly HALF of people after HSCT experience sexual dysfunction

For women, sexual dysfunction doesn’t get better over time

Unless treated!

Sexual Health and Transplant

• Most common sexual health concerns:
  • Low sexual desire
  • Sexual pain
  • Reduction in quality and quantity of sex
  • Poor body image
  • Infertility
Sexual Health and Transplant

• You’re at greater risk for these if:
  • You are/have been on chemo
  • Total body irradiation
  • Variety of medications
  • Psychosocial distress


Sexual Health and Transplant

• These cause a vicious cycle:
  • Your sexual function declines
  • So you feel bad
  • Because you feel bad
  • Your sexual function declines more
  • Then your partner feels bad
  • Relationship discord reduces QOL
What do I do?

Transplant does NOT take away your sexuality
There is treatment for sexual health side effects after transplant

Sexual Health and Transplant

- Most common sexual side effects:
  - Low sexual desire, sexual pain
- How to treat them
- How to navigate your sexual relationship
Low sexual desire

Two types of sexual desire

Spontaneous

Receptive

Hormonal changes change sexual desire

Spontaneous
Dual Control Model

- Body Image
- Fatigue
- Chemotherapy
- Depression, anxiety, stress

- Partner smell
- Partner appearance
- Novelty
- Emotional connection

Biopsychosocial Model

- Physiological
- Psychological/Emotional
- Interpersonal Relationships
- Sociocultural Influences

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Janssen & Bancroft, 2006, The Psychophysiology of Sex

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Biopsychosocial Model

- TBI
- Chemo
- Genitourinary syndrome of menopause
- Aging
- Hormones
- Fatigue

Biopsychosocial Model

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Poor body image
- Hx of sexual abuse/trauma
- Distraction
- Substance abuse
Biopsychosocial Model

- Discord
- No emotional intimacy
- Partner dysfunction
- Inadequate stimulation
- Lack of privacy

Biopsychosocial Model

- Limited sex education
- Conflict with religious, personal, or family values
- Societal taboos

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### Daily Brakes

<table>
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<th>Biological</th>
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**Receptive**

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Must Read

Low Sexual Desire – Take Home

• Two types of desire:
  • Spontaneous
  • Willingness

• With hormonal changes, willingness may become the predominant desire

• Maximize willingness:
  • Figure out the ingredients
Sexual Pain

Sexual Pain and Transplant

1. Genital Graft Versus Host Disease (GVHD)
2. Treatment induced menopause
   • Genitourinary Syndrome of Menopause (GSM)
Genital Graft Versus Host Disease (GVHD)

• 29% - 49% of women have genital GVHD

• If you have non-genital GVHD, likely to have genital GVHD

• Most women develop genital GVHD by 7 mos
  • But 25% develop up to 9 years post transplant!

Genital GVHD

• Asymptomatic if not sexually active
• Vaginal dryness
• Sexual pain
• Discharge
• Decreased elasticity
• Adhesions and scarring
• Vaginal stenosis
Treatment Induced Menopause

- Caused by surgery/chemotherapy/TBI
- Induced menopause versus natural:
  - Sudden onset
  - More severe symptoms
  - May not entirely respond to hormone treatment

Estrogen and Sexual Function

- Maintain physiological function of genitals
- Critical in preserving:
  - Vaginal sensation
  - Lubrication
  - Preventing sexual pain
  - Promoting sexual arousal
- Without estrogen, GSM
If you are having painful sex... 
• Step 1:
  • STOP!!
  • Connection between pain and sex
  • Avoidant dynamic
• Step 2:
  • Over the counter options

Step 2: Over the counter options
• Moisturizers
• Lubricants
  • Water-based
  • Silicone
If you are having painful sex . . .

• Step 1:
  • STOP!!
  • Connection between pain and sex
  • Avoidant dynamic

• Step 2:
  • Over the counter options
  • Non-penetrative sexual menu

Step 2: New sexual menu

• Consider non-penetrative sex
  • Sexual menu
  • Mojoupgrade.com
If you are having painful sex. . .

• Step 1:
  • STOP!!
  • Connection between pain and sex
  • Avoidant dynamic
• Step 2:
  • Over the counter options
  • Non-penetrative sexual menu
• Step 3:
  • Prescription options

Treatment of Genital GVHD

• Topical corticosteroid
• Prophylactic dilator use 2x/week to avoid stenosis/adhesions
• Routine gynecological exam
Treatment of Genitourinary Syndrome of Menopause

- Vaginal estrogen
  - Increases pelvic blood flow
  - Increases lubrication, elasticity
  - Increases genital tactile sensation


Sexual Pain—Take Home

- Two main causes:
  - Genital GVHD
  - Treatment Induced Menopause (GSM)
- Step 1: STOP having painful sex!
- Step 2: Over the counter/behavioral options
  - Moisturizers/lubricants
  - Non-penetrative sexual menu
- Step 3: Prescription options
Sexual Relationship

CIRCULAR MODEL

- Emotional Intimacy
- Emotional and Physical Satisfaction
- Spontaneous Sexual Drive
- Sexual Stimuli
- Sexual Arousal
- Arousal and Sexual Desire
- Biological
- Psychological

Sexual Response Cycle Differences

- Your sexual response cycle may differ
- Your partner may not understand willingness desire
- Talk with your partner about the ingredients you need to have in place in order to be willing
  - Emotional intimacy is a key ingredient
- Your cycle kickstarts with arousal, partners with spontaneous desire
What if we are in an avoidant dynamic?

How to avoid an avoidant dynamic

• Sensate Focus Exercises
Basics of Sensate Focus

• In private space
• 20-30 minutes of full body touch with a partner
• Nude to whatever extent feels comfortable
• No sexual activity allowed
• Every 48-72 hours
• Phases that build upon each other

Basics of Sensate Focus Phase 1

• No touching of breast, chest, or genitals
• No sex
• Non-verbal
• Full-body touching
• Take turns, when done say “switch”
• Using hands and fingers only
Focus on Sensations

• Temperature
• Pressure
• Texture
  • Vivid: capture immediate attention
  • Reliable: always available for focus

Sexual Relationship - Take Home

• You and your partner’s sexual response differs
• Your sexual response may need sexual arousal as a kickstart
• Emotional intimacy is a necessary ingredient
• Avoidant dynamic?
  • Sensate Focus
Overall Take Home Message

• HSCT does not take away your sexuality!
• Maximize willingness with right ingredients
  • And sharing these with your partner
• Painful sex? STOP
  • Try moisturizers, lubricants, non-penetrative menu
  • Talk to your doctor for GVHD and GSM
• Avoidant dynamic?
  • Sensate Focus (jordanrullo.com/blog)

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THANK YOU!

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Sex Therapy Referrals

• American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT)
• Society for Sex Therapy and Research (SSTAR)
• International Society of the Study of Women’s Health (ISSWSH)

Questions?

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