

## **Pelvic Floor Physical Therapy to Manage Vulva and Sexual Health for Women with Graft-versus-Host Disease**

Celebrating a Second Chance at Life  
Survivorship Symposium

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## **Pelvic Floor Physical Therapy Management of the Vulva & Sexual Health for Women with Graft versus Host Disease**

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MD Anderson Cancer Center  
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Rehabilitation Services – 5.5 years

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## Gynecology Issues that can Present after Transplant

1. Premature ovarian failure
2. Estrogen (hormonal) deficiency
3. Decreased libido (sex drive)
4. Impaired fertility
5. Vaginal graft versus host disease (GVHD)

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## Gynecology Issues that can Present after Transplant

### ❖ Premature ovarian failure:

1. common after chemo & total body irradiation for those who have stem cell transplant (blood transplant).
2. Can lead to:
  - ❖ low estrogen levels
  - ❖ decreased sexual interest
  - ❖ poor fertility.

### ❖ Low estrogen

1. Symptoms: hot flashes, night sweats, mood/sleep disorders, inability to concentrate, joint pain, impaired sexual function infertility
2. What this may mean for you medically
3. Medical treatment

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## Gynecology Issues that can Present after Transplant

### ❖ Low sexual drive

1. Medical treatment options –
  - a. Low-doses transdermal testosterone plus estrogen/progesterone hormone therapy

### ❖ Impaired fertility

1. Medical counseling

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## Gynecology Issues that can Present after Transplant

### ❖ Vulvar and Vaginal GVHD

1. Incidence after stem cell transplant – at least 25-70%
2. Median onset : 7-10 months, late onset possible > a year after transplant
3. Symptoms:
  1. Visual changes to skin and external genitalia
  2. Clitoral hood may adhere to clitoral gland
  3. Inner labia may start to disappear
  4. Vaginal opening may fuse together
  5. Vaginal canal may shorten in length and/or completely close
  6. Soreness, burning, swelling, dryness, itchiness, fissures, micro tears in skin
  7. Pain with intercourse or vaginal exams
  8. Difficulty/inability to reach orgasm

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## Gynecology Issues that can Present after Transplant

### ❖ Vulvar and Vaginal GVHD, Continued

1. Medical treatment
  - a. Topical clobetasol propionate
  - b. Topical estrogen
  - c. Silicone rings
2. Physical therapy treatment
3. Surgical treatment

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## Pelvic Floor Physical Therapists Can Treat:

- ❖ Male and female urinary incontinence
- ❖ Fecal incontinence
- ❖ Constipation
- ❖ Pelvic organ prolapse (organs drooping into the pelvis)
- ❖ Female pelvic pain (including sexual pain)
- ❖ Male pelvic pain (including penile/scrotal pain)
- ❖ Dyspareunia & Vaginismus (painful sex)
- ❖ Tailbone pain
- ❖ Pain associated with pregnancy & birth
- ❖ Interstitial Cystitis (Painful Bladder Syndrome)
- ❖ Rectal pain
- ❖ Pudendal nerve dysfunction (pelvic pain)
- ❖ Abdominal pain
- ❖ Lymphedema and pelvic congestion (swelling)
- ❖ And more!

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## What is the initial evaluation like?

### History-taking

- ❖ Detailed summary of symptoms
- ❖ Prior therapy experiences
- ❖ Pelvic trauma (birth, surgeries, etc.)
- ❖ Bladder concerns
- ❖ Bowel concerns

### Physical Testing

- ❖ External pelvic observation (skin, nerves, muscle activation/relaxation)
- ❖ Internal pelvic exam
- ❖ Orthopedic assessment from ribs down (spine, hip, any other appropriate joints)

### Patient Education

- ❖ Daily vulvar care
- ❖ Vulvar moisture regime
- ❖ Nervous system calming
- ❖ Dilator program
- ❖ Resuming sex/returning to pain-free sex
- ❖ Foods, fluids, bladder/bowel health

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Individualized  
Home  
Program  
Starting Visit  
One!



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## Treatment visits

- ❖ Continued education
- ❖ Hip stretching &/or yoga
- ❖ Deep, diaphragmatic (belly) breathing
- ❖ Gentle, hands-on nerve calming
- ❖ Internal gentle muscle trigger point release
- ❖ Possibly guided imagery or meditation to calm the nervous system, depending on your comfort level
- ❖ Dilator training

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## What is good “vulvar care?”

- ❖ **Cleaning:**
  - ❖ avoid soap, glitter, fragrance, dyes, alcohol-based products
- ❖ **Moisture program:**
  - ❖ physical therapist-approved daily hydration
- ❖ **Vulvar self-checks** at least weekly (like self-breast exams)
  - ❖ But how do you know what you’re looking at?
  - ❖ What’s “normal”?
  - ❖ What’s *your* normal?

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[www.labialibrary.org.au/photo-gallery/#](http://www.labialibrary.org.au/photo-gallery/#)

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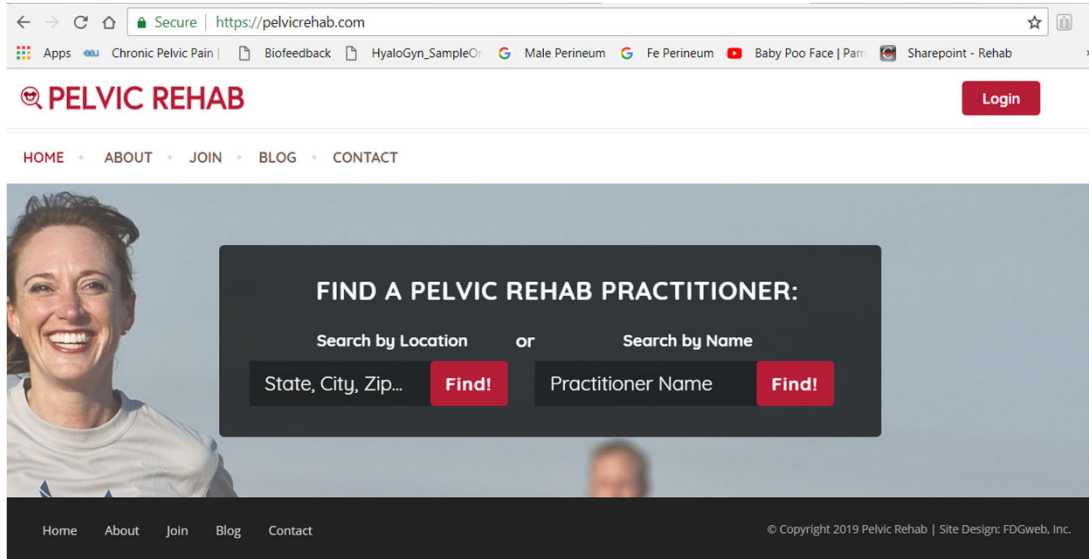
## Psychosocial issues and other therapies available

- ❖ Body image
- ❖ Sexual positioning
- ❖ Depression/anxiety
- ❖ Occupational therapy
- ❖ Certified sexual therapy  
(couples' counseling with talk therapist with expertise in the precise field of sexual intimacy)
- ❖ Social work

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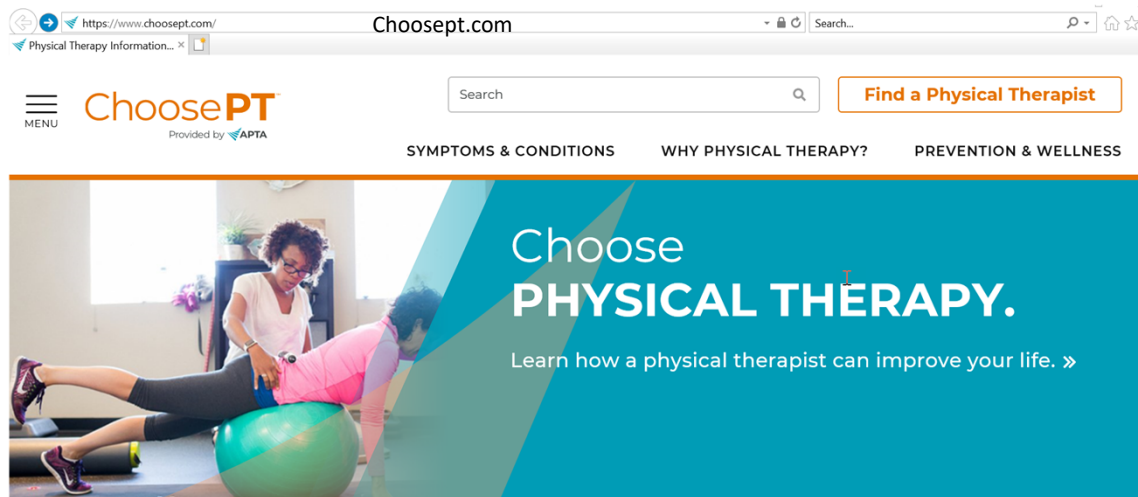
## Reputable resources for finding pelvic floor physical therapy



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## Reputable resources for finding pelvic floor physical therapy



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# Questions?



**Nikki Samms PT, DPT**

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**We're here to help every step of the way!**

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