MMRF PATIENT WELLNESS GUIDE

Sexual Health & Wellness

UNDERSTANDING HOW MYELOMA AND ITS TREATMENT can affect sexual health and intimacy can help you make informed decisions and stay connected with your partner.

Sexual health is an important part of your overall well-being

Sexual health is an important part of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being. It can affect how you feel about yourself, your relationships, and your connection to your partner and others close to you.

Concerns with sex and intimacy are common for people living with myeloma, yet care teams don't often ask about these issues. Talking about sex and intimacy is an important part of taking care of your overall health — do not hesitate to start a conversation with your care team.

Myeloma and its treatments can affect sexual health

Myeloma and its treatment can affect your sexual health in different ways. It's important to remember these changes are common.

- Some patients are less interested in sex or have changes in arousal due to side effects, including pain and fatigue
- Some patients also experience changes to their appearance which may affect self-esteem, confidence, and comfort with intimacy
- In some relationships, partners take on caregiving roles, which can create a shift in relationship dynamics, potentially affecting emotional and physical intimacy

Ask your doctor when/if sex is safe

- Physical issues, like fatigue or pain, may be barriers
- Some treatments increase risk of infection
- Low blood counts may increase risk of bleeding and infection
- Some treatment drugs cause birth defects and birth control precautions must be used

Communication with your partner is essential

Myeloma can affect your relationships in many ways. Creating space for open, honest communication with your partner about how you both feel can help you stay connected and even deepen your relationship.

- Agree on a time to talk about myeloma when you can be calm and engaged
- Give your partner a chance to share their feelings
- Talk about what you're experiencing both physically and emotionally

If communication feels hard, you may find it helpful to have a nurse, counselor, or sexual health specialist guide the conversation.

Tips for talking to your doctor about sexual health

Only about 30% of patients say that their care team asks how myeloma or treatment affects their sexual health, so you may need to bring your concerns to your doctor instead of waiting for them to ask.

Start the conversation with an opening question:

- "I've read that this treatment may affect sexual health. Can we talk about what to expect?"
- "I'm experiencing some changes in my sexual health. What options are available to help?"
- "I'm having trouble adjusting to changes in my body. What support is available?"

Be open and honest:

- It's common to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed talking about sex, especially if it's something you don't usually discuss, but your care team is used to these conversations and can help
- Information you share with your care team is confidential, and you may ask to speak with a different provider if you would be more comfortable

Ask for referrals when needed:

- Your provider may refer you to a sex educator, counselor, or therapist for emotional or relational concerns
- For physical symptoms, referrals may include specialists, such as a gynecologist, urologist, endocrinologist, or pelvic floor specialist

Notice changes in your sexual health?

If you experience changes in sexual health or intimacy, share them with your care team. Nurse practitioners and nurse navigators often manage these concerns.

Support is available to help you feel more comfortable, stay connected with your partner, and regain confidence.

Ways to support sexual health and intimacy

- **Know that intimacy comes in many forms:** Give yourself permission to redefine intimacy to reduce pressure and support connection during and after treatment
- **Communicate with your partner:** Open communication may help you find new ways to connect emotionally and physically
- **Address physical symptoms that affect intimacy:** Managing pain, fatigue and other treatment side effects may improve comfort and enjoyment
- **Manage stress and anxiety:** Finding ways to cope with stress and anxiety may help you navigate emotional changes that are affecting your relationships

Have more questions about sexual health and wellness?

The MMRF Patient Navigation Center is available to answer your questions and provide additional support. Give us a call at 1-888-841-6673, Monday-Friday, 9AM-7PM ET, or visit us online at themmrf.org/support/patient-navigation-center/