

Health for Him

Intimacy and Prostate Cancer (Or, "So, who is this ED anyway?")

Couples who face prostate cancer can often face unexpected sexual challenges.

By Elizabeth Cabalka

Sex.

There. I said it. Did I get your attention? This word seems to be everywhere today. What was once only spoken of in private is now found everywhere. From lusty TV dramas, supermarket tabloids, movies, and the Internet, sex is everywhere.

There is one exception. For some couples facing prostate cancer, the silence on this subject can be deafening. Far too many couples learn of the impact prostate cancer treatment can have on their sex life only *after* treatment, when they find themselves knee deep in disappointment, fear, and frustration. Only then do they learn of the reality of the words impotence and erectile dysfunction, often called ED.

Prostate cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in American males today. Two men every five minutes are diagnosed with prostate cancer in the United States today, staggering and sobering numbers.

A prostate cancer diagnosis can be devastating for the patient and his spouse or companion. The often-resulting erectile dysfunction and/or incontinence due to surgery or other treatment can bring additional grief, confusion and trauma to couples during an already stressful time. After treatment, many couples feel utterly unprepared to deal with the physical and emotional impact on their intimate relationship. One spouse confessed, "I thought ED was the guy down the street, not a medical condition that could devastate my marriage."

Couples facing prostate cancer often feel the need to be more connected than ever. Instead, confusion, embarrassment and fear caused by ED can cause both parties to feel alone and disconnected.

In the midst of this difficult news, it is important to know that there is HOPE. Perhaps more importantly, there are **options** that make mutually satisfactory sexual relationships possible in the presence of ED and impotence. In this instance, information truly is power. Paired with open and frank discussion and a willingness to explore options, couples facing ED can find satisfying solutions.

PROSTATE CANCER & ED

So what exactly is ED and why is it so closely linked with prostate cancer?

Normal male sexual function is a constellation of processes, including desire, emotional and psychological considerations, and physical function. Erectile dysfunction -- commonly known as impotence -- is defined as the inability to achieve or maintain an erection that is sufficient for satisfactory sexual activity. However, almost all men who have ED/impotence can overcome it.

The link to prostate cancer: The prostate is a small gland located at the bottom of the bladder. Common treatments for prostate cancer include pelvic surgery to remove the prostate (called a radical prostatectomy,) radiation and/or hormone therapy.

ED following major pelvic surgery is not uncommon. The nerves which allow for an erection lie within millimeters of the prostate. These nerves may be injured by being cut or separated from the prostate during surgery. This may cause temporary or permanent impotence, although sexual desire and the ability to achieve orgasm should remain. Radiation can also impact this group of nerves. Hormone therapy can also cause a reduction in libido and possible difficulties with erections. This is generally reversible when the therapy is discontinued.

THE JOURNEY TO SOLUTIONS

Many couples who have successfully faced ED and prostate cancer stress the many facets of their journey:

- Acknowledging the grief of the loss of their intimate life as they knew it before
- Recognizing the fear that the level of intimacy they previously enjoyed would not return



- Making a choice to remain open and discuss their feelings and concerns
- Remaining willing to examine their intimate life and possibly redefine intimacy
- Staying committed to exploring options and finding solutions.

Erectile dysfunction and sexual intimacy can be challenging to discuss under the best of circumstances. Add the stress of a prostate cancer diagnosis, and the challenge to remain open can be multiplied. When sexual challenges arise, many couples suffer far too long because the lines of communication shut down and fear takes over. Those who are successful at finding solutions are those who are willing to keep the lines of communication open, even when it is uncomfortable or difficult.

Most couples do not realize is that there are many possible solutions to restoring sexual intimacy, even after prostate cancer treatment. From pills, to external devices, injections and surgical procedures, there are solutions for nearly everyone. With persistence, a little humor, open discussion, and medical support, couples can reclaim sexual intimacy once again.

Fortunately there are many medical professionals, generally urologists, who specialize in treating ED. An excellent urologist is one who is:

- Sensitive to the difficult nature of the topic
- Able to engage in open and frank discussion with the patient and his spouse or companion
- Exceptionally knowledgeable and skilled in a large variety of treatment options for restoring sexual function.

Diane, whose husband, was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1999, says this about their journey, "After treatment we were just so glad that he was alive. As the months passed, we resumed our lives, except an important part was now mysteriously gone. After one failed attempt in the bedroom, we both shut down and pretended to focus on other things. I didn't want to pressure him and he was too embarrassed to discuss it. One year later, we were both deeply sad and disconnected. On a weekend vacation, we both started crying and acknowledged our fears. After a tearful discussion, we recommitted to our intimacy and began our quest for solutions with a wonderful urologist. It was not always smooth sailing, some options didn't work for us and others worked only for a while. Persistence won the day though. Five years later, we have a wonderful relationship again and far better communication than ever before."

Don't let ED become a silent, unwelcome, over-bearing house guest. If you and your spouse are facing ED, whether it is the result of prostate cancer treatment or not, do not let fear, embarrassment, or discomfort destroy your love life. Become knowledgeable about ED. Seek help from medical professionals who specialize in sexual function and keep the lines of communication open.



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"Someone to talk to... who understands"