

Between the Sheets...

December 2020

This column provides the platform for experts in the field to help men and women by providing answers to questions about sexual health and intimacy challenges that can result from prostate cancer treatment.

This column was compiled with the help of Dr. Anne Katz, Certified Sexuality Counselor and Clinical Nurse Specialist at CancerCare Manitoba. She has educated thousands of healthcare providers and cancer survivors about cancer, sexuality and survivorship. She is the editor of the Oncology Nursing Forum, an avid blogger for ASCO Connections, and the author of 13 books on the topics of illness, sexuality and cancer survivorship. (www.drannekatz.com)

QUESTION FROM PROSTATE CANCER SURVIVOR:

I can't get the answers I need for my questions or problems but I am really frustrated at the length of time it is taking for things to return to normal for me. I had radiation (36 treatments) that ended about 9 months ago, as well as hormone therapy with my last injection 3 months ago. I am still having hot flashes and I have not seen any return of erections, never mind sexual interest. I'm 74 years old and I feel like my life is over. I thought that once my treatment was done I would see improvements in all areas but, so far, things are as bad as they ever were. Am I alone in this? What do other men experience?

RESPONSE FROM DR. ANNE KATZ:

Firstly, you are NOT alone. This is a question that I am frequently asked, always by men who are frustrated about the length of time it is taking for things to return to normal. Every man has his own idea of what normal is, but the three issues that seem to be most common are hot flashes, return of sexual interest (libido), and ongoing lack of erections.

The quick answer to this is "It depends." There are many factors that go into when any of the above will improve. This depends, in part, on the return of testosterone levels to the normal range or to baseline for the individual man. A recent study (Nascimento et al., 2019) of men who had from 3 to 42 months of androgen deprivation therapy found that two years after the end of the treatment, 8% did not see any increase in their testosterone levels, 76% returned to testosterone in the normal range, and 51% had testosterone levels at their baseline (before treatment) level. Those with lower levels of testosterone at the start of treatment and those who received more than 6 months of androgen deprivation therapy were less likely to see a return to normal levels, and those who were older than 65 years and who had also received more than 6 months of androgen deprivation therapy were more likely to see a slower recovery of testosterone levels. This all means that you can hope for, or expect, changes in all your symptoms with time – although this may not be fast enough for you.

But testosterone is not the only issue. You have had radiation, in addition, and you are now a year older than you were when you started treatment. You do not say if radiation was your first treatment; did you have surgery before that and when? And age is not a friend to the penis! As men age their ability to both achieve and maintain an erection declines. This is related to changes in the cardiovascular system (arteries and nerves) as well as other conditions they may have (for example, diabetes) and any medications they are taking to treat these conditions.

The hot flashes may often persist for many months and this can be distressing, as this may affect your sleep and can also be embarrassing. Hopefully you were advised about some measures that can help – fan in the bedroom, light cotton clothing etc. when you started treatment. You can also talk to your primary care provider about possibly taking medication that may help. 'It depends' as an answer is frustrating for most men, but this is all we have to offer. Everyone is different, and how your body reacts to the medication – as well as how quickly things return to whatever you define as normal – is variable.

Bruno Nascimento, Eduardo P. Miranda, Lawrence C. Jenkins, Nicole Benfante, Elizabeth A. Schofield, John P. Mulhall, MD, MSc, FECSM. (2019). Testosterone Recovery Profiles After Cessation of Androgen Deprivation Therapy for Prostate Cancer. *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 16 (6), 872-879.

Watch Dr. Katz' presentation on sexual health and intimacy from the Prostate Cancer Pathways for Patients and Caregivers event recorded at Englewood Health in Englewood, NJ on September 29, 2018 at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2ZdDHw2WGY&t=8542s>.

Read previous issues of *Between the Sheets* at www.ustoo.org/BTS.

Do you have a question about sexual health or intimacy? If so, we invite you to send it to Us TOO. We'll select questions to feature in future *Between the Sheets* columns.

Please email your question to: ustooBTS@ustoo.org

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Us TOO International
Between the Sheets
2720 S. River Road, Suite 112
Des Plaines, IL 0018

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