

Between the Sheets...

July 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. Jeffrey Albaugh, Director of Sexual Health at NorthShore University HealthSystem and at Jesse Brown VA Medical Center in Chicago, IL. Dr. Albaugh is a funded researcher, a board certified advanced practice urology clinical nurse specialist, and a board certified sexuality counselor. In addition to his many publications in peer reviewed journals and chapters in books on sexual dysfunction, Dr. Albaugh published *Reclaiming Sex and Intimacy After Prostate Cancer Treatment*. He has been quoted in media and publications as an expert in the treatment of sexual dysfunction, and is a member of the Us TOO Board of Directors.

QUESTION FROM PROSTATE CANCER SURVIVOR:

It has been about 13 months since my robotic nerve-sparing radical prostatectomy surgery. I wondered why my erections seem stronger when I am working on the penile rehabilitation on my own and sometimes during a bowel movement then when I am trying to have sex with my wife?

RESPONSE FROM DR. JEFFREY ALBAUGH:

Thank you for your excellent question. I hear this from many men with prostate cancer, and it is not uncommon. When you are having a bowel movement, the stool is moving through your bowels where your prostate used to be, and in the location of the nerves that were dissected off your prostate during surgery. The movement of the stool against those nerves may cause some reaction in terms of fullness or erection in your penis. That is why you sometimes notice erections during a bowel movement.

In addition, you asked why you are getting better erections when working on your own on penile rehabilitation as compared to when you are trying to have sex with your partner. This common problem occurs for several reasons. First, there are other factors at play when you are trying to have sex with your wife, including performance anxiety. Any type of anxiety increases adrenaline, which has a negative impact on erections. There is no one else involved in penile rehabilitation on your own, and so there is no anxiety about performance or worry of disappointing your wife. Second, there is a direct connection between your brain and your hand that uses a biofeedback system to allow you to do what is needed to get an erection. Men and women both can become aroused and climax quicker with self-stimulation because of that biofeedback system. This has been shown by multiple researchers in the past including Masters and Johnson and Kinsey. It is frustrating for you and for other men who experience better erections on their own than with their partner because, just when you need the erections the most, they are either not occurring as well or they are not reliable during partner sex.

So what can you do about it? Communication with your partner is critical. Both of you need to understand what is going on and that it is no one's fault. The more you both know and understand about the physical reasons for the erectile dysfunction, the better. Your penis is no longer a barometer of how excited you are by your partner. It can be extremely helpful to work together with the common goals of feeling deeper connection and pleasure during intimacy. You can achieve those goals with or without an erection. If you are hard enough, you can have penetrative sex, but if you are not hard enough, you can still have non-penetrative (outercourse) leading to deep connection with your partner, pleasure and orgasms. I highly encourage you to continue working both on your penile rehabilitation and on regular intimacy and sex with your partner. Continue to gather the information you both need to continue to understand what is going on with your body and work together with your partner to maximize pleasure and connectedness during sex. Think about exploring different ways of pleasuring each other that do not require a full erection such as manual stimulation, oral stimulation and/or vibratory stimulation. I hope this information is helpful for you and your wife.

You can access the new edition of my book or download a free copy of my original book at www.drjeffalbaugh.com.

Watch Dr. Albaugh's presentation on sexual health and intimacy from the *Prostate Cancer Pathways for Patients and Caregivers* event recorded at NorthShore University HealthSystem in Skokie, IL on November 3, 2018 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1q0dDEb1l0&t=4483s>.

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.

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