

# Regaining Sexual Drive After Cancer Treatment

*Dear Readers: When I was first approached to write the "Intimacy, Sex & Relationship" column for The Courant, it was a bold step for the newspaper.*



DR. SANDRA SCANTLING  
INTIMACY, SEX & RELATIONSHIP

*None of us knew how this subject would be received, and we took a leap of faith together. Since then, we've received piles of e-mails and letters supporting the decision. I am grateful for*

*your kind remarks, your support and your suggestions. Hardly a day goes by without my hearing a comment about the column — how it is passed around the office or discussed with your partner at home. Recently, the receptionist in my doctor's office told me that she plans to tell her 20-year-old daughter to read the column. When we have mothers like this, it's easier to grow up to be healthy women.*

*Sex is a difficult subject to discuss — for all of us. We must walk a fine line between what is informative and what is offensive. I continue to welcome your ideas and comments as I shape this column to better suit your needs. Thank you for hanging in there with me. My best wishes to you and your family for a happy, healthy warmly connected holiday season.*

I've decided to devote today's column to a question about sexual functioning after breast cancer treatment.

As you know, each woman and her partner will be affected differently by this illness, so please don't apply what I'm suggesting as a template for all women with breast cancer. Rather, I suggest you use it as a jumping-off point to stimulate discussion between you and your loved ones and the health-care providers on your team.

#### Dear Dr. Scantling:

*I tested positive for the BRCA1 gene mutation and was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 46. I had a bilateral mastectomy, chemotherapy and then a prophylactic oophorectomy in June. Since November, I have lost all sex drive and have been unable to achieve orgasm. Is there anything that might help? My OB/GYN and oncologist agreed to let me try Estring two weeks ago, but so far I have not experienced any benefits.*

— Viviane in Meriden

#### Dear Viviane:

Thank you for your letter. For women who may not be familiar with genetic screening, in 1994 there were two breast cancer susceptibility genes identified: BRCA1 on chromosome 17 and BRCA2 on chromosome 13, indicating that a woman is at increased risk for being diagnosed with breast or ovarian

cancer at some point in her lifetime.

In your situation, you've undergone surgical and chemical treatment following your breast cancer diagnosis, including the surgical removal of both breasts and the preventive removal of your ovaries. You now say that you've "lost all sex drive and have been unable to have an orgasm."

Let me answer the question about the Estring first.

Estring is a type of estradiol (a natural form of estrogen) that is absorbed into the blood stream in very low amounts. Estring will not directly improve your sexual drive or orgasm. Notice I say "directly." Estrogen keeps the lining of the vagina elastic; it is responsible for lubrication, swelling and female genital arousal. Estring, after a period of time that varies from woman to woman, may help to provide relief from vaginal dryness or irritation that often follows surgical oophorectomy or "normal" menopause.

Sexual functioning includes three components: drive (also called libido or desire), arousal, and response (orgasm). All aspects are related and connected but are not identical. Sexual drive is stimulated by androgens and by dopamine. In women, androgens (testosterone) are produced by the adrenal glands and by the ovaries.

So even though you've had your ovaries removed, your adrenals are still producing a

portion of your androgens — the question is how much. We don't currently have any testosterone creams approved by the FDA specifically for women, but it is sometimes used "off label" in certain cases. Because a portion of testosterone is "aromatized" to estrogen, each woman must weigh the risks and benefits in discussion with her health-care provider. Dopamine also stimulates desire. There are some antidepressant medications that are reported to enhance dopamine, but again, each situation must be evaluated individually.

It's important to keep in mind that sexual drive and response are not only affected by our bio-physiology and endocrine functioning; they're also affected by our cognitions (how we think), our emotions, our attitudes, body image and intimate relationships. You need to ask yourself how your diagnosis of breast cancer and the subsequent treatments have affected your life. How has all that changed the way you feel about yourself as a woman or a sexual being? I also wonder if you've shared these feelings with your lover. This is an opportunity to deepen your intimacy and your sexual connection.

To regain your sexual drive, you need to pay attention to your overall health: Keep a balance between work and play, exercise, no smoking, drink in moderation, maintain a

reasonable weight and keep a positive mental attitude. Learn how to recognize and enhance your "sexy" thoughts and deepen your erotic focus. Use your imagination to put you and your partner in the mood — maybe you can read evocative stories together, watch stimulating movies or share a new toy. (I'm not talking about Scrabble here.) Once you've gotten the engine turned on, use whatever works for you to keep it revved up.

There are also a variety of creams that increase genital sensitivity and heighten responsiveness. Be careful not to use any that contain menthol or other irritants. Zestra is a preparation of botanical oils. It's available over the counter, and many of my patients have said they like the effect. Just rub a small amount onto your clitoris (make this part of your lovemaking, if you like). The simple act of massaging the cream into your genitals can stimulate blood flow to the area and should feel good. If you have any allergic reactions, stop immediately and consult your doctor.

There are other compounded preparations that are non-hormonal but improve blood flow and can help things feel better "down there." Once you're in the groove, the trick is to keep focused on what feels good, and learn to ride the wave until you experience orgasm. One of the best books and videos I know about enhancing orgasms is

"Becoming Orgasmic" by Dr. Julia Heiman and Joseph LoPiccolo, available on Amazon.com.

It's been said that at the heart of every crisis lies opportunity. We can be strengthened by our obstacles. Sexual desire and response transcend our breasts and our genitals — to include the connection of mind, body, and spirit.

Wishing you good health...

— Dr. Scantling

*This column is to be considered informational and is not intended as a substitute for professional, medical or psychological advice, diagnosis or treatment. Please consult your own doctor or therapist before adhering to any information or recommendations.*

*The letters reprinted here are from real people but, in order to protect their privacy, some information that might identify the writers has been omitted or changed. Case material used here are composites and not intended to represent any actual couple or individual.*

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