



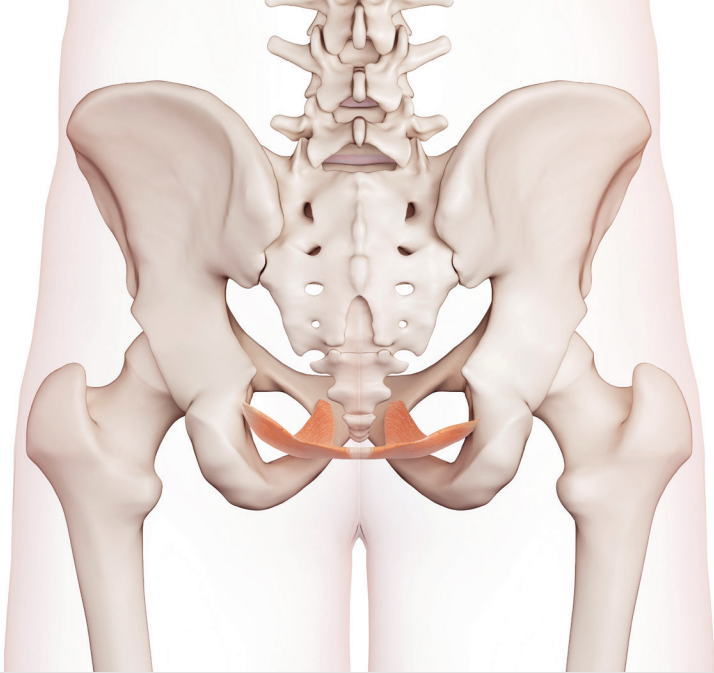
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Pelvic Floor Changes After Cancer

A Patient Guide

Many women report pelvic floor and sexual health concerns after a cancer diagnosis. This guide will help you to understand these changes, learn about questions to ask and find resources that may improve your pelvic floor and quality of life.



What is the pelvic floor?

The bowl-shaped female pelvic floor muscles are located at the the bottom of your pelvis. They support your bladder, rectum and reproductive organs. They help control urination, bowel movements, and are active during sexual function. These muscles also provide strength and stability to the abdomen, lower back, and spine. The pelvic floor muscles work with your back, abdomen, and diaphragm to create your core which helps support the rest of your body.

What happens to the pelvic floor as we age?

Many common things that happen to the female body impact the pelvic floor. Things such as childbearing, menopause, weight changes, sedentary lifestyle, poor posture, aging, obesity, trauma (physical and mental), surgeries, hormone changes, and medications can also cause weak or tight muscles.

Pelvic floor changes may include pain, tightness, weakness, incontinence, lack of sex drive, and changes in appearance and body image.



What types of cancer affect the pelvic floor?

Pelvic Floor changes impact 60% of all women after cancer. Examples include many GI cancers such as anal and rectal. Gynecological cancers include cervical, ovarian, vaginal, and vulvar. Hormone-related cancers such as breast, thyroid, and osteosarcoma.

78%

65%

78% of gynecological cancer survivors and **65%** of breast and colorectal cancer survivors report unwanted pelvic floor changes impacting their physical, emotional, and mental health and quality of life.

How do specific cancer treatments impact the pelvic floor?

SURGERY: pain, weakness, scarring, shortened vagina, frequent UTIs, bowel and/or bladder changes (incontinence, urge, constipation)

CHEMOTHERAPY: weakness, fatigue, hair loss, numbness/tingling of fingers/toes, nausea, changes in body fat and muscle mass

RADIATION: pain, fatigue, narrowing or closing of the vagina, low back/hip/pelvis tightness, and pain

HORMONE BLOCKERS: hot flashes, night sweats, mood swings, joint pains, vaginal dryness, headaches, fatigue, insomnia, muscles aches, weight changes.



How can your sexual health be affected by cancer treatments?

Sexual Health is not only about sex. It's also how you feel about yourself and it's about feeling in control of your own body.

Here are two patient stories about how side effects cause significant concerns.

"Surgery and radiation caused pelvic floor pain and she is afraid of pain that will occur with sex so she avoids her partner's physical touch, causing a strain in the relationship. She's nervous to talk to her doctor about sex-he saved her life so she doesn't want to complain. Her avoidance of sexual activity increases tension between she and her partner-leaving both feeling shameful, lonely, guilty, and helpless."

"Chemotherapy caused a woman to lose both her hair and sensation in her fingers. She has lost her muscle definition, gained weight and is always fatigued. She now feels unattractive and is ashamed of her body. She has lost much of her confidence and sex drive so she no longer gets dressed up and avoids physical intimacy."

Please continue reading about helpful strategies to address sexual concerns you may be experiencing.

Journaling or writing out any changes or concerns you have may be helpful for you emotionally and help with communication with your partner or provider.

Here are some questions to consider.

- Do I feel confident? Do I look and feel like myself? Why or why not?
- How have concerns with my pelvic floor affected my relationship with my body?
- How have my pelvic floor side effects (pain, incontinence, low sex drive) changed my relationship with my partner?
- Am I limiting my work and/or social life due to bowel/bladder problems?
- How have my hobbies and personal interests been impacted by pelvic pain, changes in appearance, and changes in my day-to-day functioning?
- Would I like to talk with someone else to sort out my concerns? Would my partner want to talk to someone? Alone or together?



How can you communicate your concerns?

It can be uncomfortable or awkward to discuss your pelvic floor, sexual changes, and associated physical or emotional challenges with others. This may even be the hardest with those you love the most. Some women may feel embarrassed or ashamed and not be as willing to reach out for support.



We recommend you ask yourself these hard questions in the previous section. Then, if you have a partner, ask them. You could ask close friends and family. Consider how your life has been affected by cancer and your continued challenges. Prepare questions for your healthcare provider and consider what concerns you would like to address first. (Below are some suggested interventions for side effects.)

A healthcare provider does not know your side effects and concerns unless told. Not all healthcare providers will ask about incontinence and your sex life—so you may have to take the lead. Be proactive and ask your questions, even when they are hard.

Who can help the pelvic floor?

Pelvic floor therapists. A pelvic floor therapist is a specially trained physical or occupational therapist who understands the pelvic region's muscles, organs, and soft tissue and treats this area with compassion and professionalism.

A pelvic floor therapist will assess and help to improve soft tissue mobility, strength, endurance, bowel/bladder control, reduce pain (internally and externally), and improve the general movement of the hips and pelvic region.

Pelvic floor therapy may also address bowel and bladder habits, toileting postures, sexual positions and strategies, and mindfulness.

Next Steps

If your side effects are not improving, please speak with your provider to seek further assistance for your concerns. Consider these suggestions.

For physical pain, bowel/bladder issues:

Consider asking for a referral to a pelvic floor therapist. HCA Midwest Health has pelvic floor therapy throughout the Kansas City area.

Learn more at www.hcamidwest.com/cancerrehab



For Sexual/Intimacy Concerns:

Consider visiting a Sexual Health Professional (alone or with a partner) to improve sexual intimacy. Find a sexual health professional near you:

<https://www.aasect.org/referral-directory>



For Mental Health Concerns:

Consider talking to a mental health professional/counselor/therapist to address depression/anxiety concerns.

Consider Joining a virtual support group or talking with another woman with similar concerns.

For Body Image Concerns:

Consider visiting a behavior health professional to address harmful habits and self-image.



For other Side effects:

If you have concerns caused by your medications, such as depression, mood swings, sweats, please talk with your provider about your medicines and hormones.

Please use this guide to provide some suggested directions and action steps. Talk with a member of your care team if you have questions or are looking for additional resources that may not be listed here.

Wellness habits also support your body to heal and repair.

Follow physician guidelines for physical activity and follow post-operative precautions.

During and after treatment, it is recommended to:

- Stay well hydrated (try to drink $\frac{1}{2}$ your body weight in ounces each day).
- Regular complete voiding of bladder 6-8x per day.
- Consume 25-30 grams of fiber per day to support regular bowel movements.
- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight. Consume a diet that supports your weight goals.
- Have good sleep hygiene habits: Sleep in a cool, dark, comfortable space. Keep a regular schedule, have a consistent space and nighttime routine, and avoid screens before bed.
- Take in early sunlight each day to improve your sleep/wake cycle. Sunlight can improve your mood, even if it's indoors.





Exercise reduces fatigue and weakness while improving joint and soft tissue mobility.

Although you are fatigued, you must move to generate more energy. A combination of aerobic (walking, biking, hiking, etc.) and strengthening (weight lifting, pilates, etc.) is ideal.

It is recommended that women get 15-20 minutes a day of exercise and complete a total of 150 minutes of moderate weekly exercise. If you need guidance for this, ask your provider or the wellness team for local resources that can help you develop an individualized plan.

The Cancer Wellness team is here to help you!

We have resources about exercise available to all patients. We can also help guide you to a pelvic floor therapist and other resources such as a registered dietician for your nutrition concerns.



www.hcamidwest.com/cancerwellness

The Cancer Wellness Team: 816-276-3213

Bowel/bladder suggestions to try

Practice good toileting posture

Sit on the toilet with feet elevated on a stool with feet widened. Do not strain during bowel movements. Consider using a “squatty potty” to help you void.

Keep a “food and toileting diary”

Record what and how much you eat and drink. Also record when you urinate and have bowel movements. Write down when you have accidents and any other descriptions that may be important.

Consider and document

How often do you go to the bathroom?

Do you have any challenges with voiding? (constipation, unpredictable, incontinence)

Do you notice any consistent challenges after particular food or drinks?

Diet sodas, caffeine, and acidic foods/drinks can increase urinary and digestive issues.

Look for patterns of bowel/bladder difficulties and consider habit changes to help.

Want more bowel/bladder suggestions?

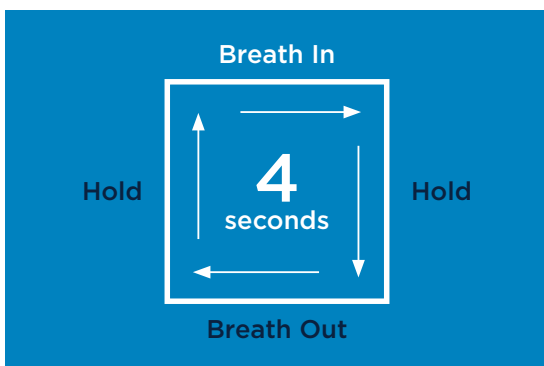
Ask for a referral to pelvic floor therapy.





Deep breathing exercises such as box breathing (shown here) are powerful yet simple strategies you can use in virtually any situation.

Box breathing can help calm down your nervous system as well as relax your brain and body when you are feeling stressed or anxious.



1. Sit in a comfortable position and seal your lips together. Breathe in through your nose while counting to four slowly. Close your eyes if possible.
2. Hold your breath while slowly counting to four. This may feel difficult if you are feeling very anxious or stressed. Still, you should note a calming sensation as you continue.
3. Begin to slowly exhale for 4 seconds.
4. Hold your breath while slowly counting to four.

Repeat for 4-5 cycles using the fingers on one hand, to count which round you are on.

We hope this guide has helped educate and empower you regarding pelvic floor concerns after cancer treatments.

Please consider asking yourself and your loved ones these complex questions in this guide. Then, use the ideas in this guide to assist you in taking the next step in improving your pelvic floor function, sexual health, and quality of life.

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