

Better Education and Treatment of Sexual Health for Breast Cancer Patients

Researchers reveal patients would like better education and counseling about how treatment can negatively impact their sexual health.

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A new study released by the [University of Colorado Cancer Center](#) shows that more than 70 percent of [breast cancer](#) patients have reported changes that affect their sexual health during and beyond treatment.

The study was published today in the [Annals of Surgical Oncology](#).

"More than 3.8 million breast cancer survivors live with permanent or temporary physical and psychological consequences of treatment that impact their sexual health. However, there is limited data that advises providers on the preferred format and timing of sexual health education," said Sarah Tevis, MD, assistant professor of surgical oncology at the University of Colorado School of Medicine on the [CU Anschutz Medical Campus](#).

The study mentions that most oncology teams don't discuss many of the potential sexual health effects of breast cancer treatment with patients.

"Patients we spoke with in focus groups all reported sexual side effects they were not prepared for during treatment. However, all expressed the desire to have those effects addressed early in the diagnosis and would like counseling to be available from the medical team," said Tevis, CU Cancer Center member.

The study revealed that while fertility and menopausal issues are usually addressed by providers, common issues like vaginal dryness, sexual desire, pain during intercourse and body image issues are rarely discussed. This is either due to limited availability of time, discomfort with the topic or lack of training in the diagnosis and treatment of sexual issues.

"One of the patients I spoke with told me that she was bleeding every time she would go to the restroom because of vaginal dryness," Tevis said. "She never brought it up to her doctor because she assumed there was nothing that could be done. We need to discuss these issues on the front

end to make patients more comfortable talking to their treatment team and so that patients are aware of mitigation strategies.”

Not a “one-size-fits-all” approach

The study also revealed that there is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach when it comes to tackling these issues. Of the 87 patients who participated in the study, each had their own preference on how they wanted to be presented with such sensitive information.

“We found that younger patients preferred to have in-person conversations with their team while older patients tended to want to review written materials,” Tevis said. “Cultural backgrounds and beliefs also impacted how patients preferred to broach the topic. This means doctors must think about each individual when delivering information.”

The study has led to a partnership between the university and the nonprofit organization [Catch It In Time](#). Together they are producing a series of videos that aim to help educate both medical professionals and patients on issues surrounding sexual health. The team hopes to have them available sometime in the fall. The videos will be available on the [Colorado Program for Patient Centered Decisions Website](#).

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