

to
My
Soul

ENGAGEo
ESGO European Network of Gynaecological
Cancer Advocacy Groups

05

MAY / 2025

Body Image & Sexual Health



objective

01

BODY IMAGE & SEXUAL HEALTH DURING AND AFTER TREATMENT

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Undergoing gynaecological cancer treatment may bring significant changes to both your body image and sexual health. These changes may affect how you perceive yourself — physically, mentally, and emotionally — and often extend beyond physical treatment.

Whether due to surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, or hormonal therapy, women may experience a range of symptoms and side effects that can feel overwhelming. From hair loss and weight fluctuations to vaginal dryness, altered libido, or even the removal of reproductive organs, the treatment process can bring many challenges to navigate.





Some of these changes may be temporary, while others, such as surgical procedures, can have lasting effects. For many women, the absence of visible scars or outward signs — such as after the removal of an ovary — can be both a comfort and a challenge. On the one hand, this privacy allows for a sense of normalcy in public, but it can also lead to feelings of invisibility, as the depth of the experience remains unseen by others. This can sometimes make the emotional impact feel unrecognized or invalidated. Conversely, for those with visible changes, the adjustment can deeply affect self-image, confidence, emotional well-being, and sexuality.



*my body
is still mine!*



Whatever changes you're experiencing, always remember that you are not alone.

**These changes
don't define you.**

Your body is still yours, still strong, still deserving of love, pleasure, and care. Healing rarely follows a straight path, but you don't have to walk it alone. Support, understanding, and compassionate guidance are here to help you reconnect with yourself and embrace your evolving sense of self.



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02



**RECLAIMING
YOUR BODY
IMAGE:** EMBRACING
CHANGE AND FINDING
CONFIDENCE

3 steps to...

**Rebuilding your
body image
during and after
gynaecological
cancer treatment
is a *gradual* and
deeply personal
process.**

Rebuilding your body image during and after gynaecological cancer treatment is a gradual and deeply personal process. It requires self-compassion, patience, and a willingness to reconnect with your body in new ways. While it can be difficult, understanding that you are not alone in this experience can help reduce feelings of isolation. Here are practical steps that might help you navigate this pathway:

Practice Self-Compassion

It's perfectly normal to feel frustration, sadness, or discomfort as your body changes during and after treatment. Allow yourself the grace to experience these emotions, rather than suppress them. Self-compassion means understanding that these feelings are part of the healing process, and that they do not diminish your worth. Acknowledge your feelings but don't let them define you.

#2



Explore New Ways to Feel Confident

Rebuilding confidence in your appearance may involve trying new clothing styles, experimenting with makeup, or wearing accessories that make you feel good. Some women find that scarves, wigs, or head coverings help them feel more themselves during hair loss, while others prefer to embrace a natural look. Similarly, if your body has changed, consider clothing choices that fit and flatter your new shape, whether it's looser fabrics that provide comfort or more form-fitting items that make you feel empowered.

#3

Body Image Therapy and Support Groups

Professional therapy or support groups can be incredibly helpful for women struggling with body image issues during and after cancer treatment. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has proven highly effective in addressing negative self-beliefs and anxiety around body image, intimacy, and self-worth. CBT helps reframe unhelpful thoughts and replace them with healthier, more compassionate perspectives. A therapist specializing in body image, sexuality, or post-treatment survivorship care can guide you through exercises that challenge negative thoughts and strengthen your confidence, while support groups provide a space to share experiences with others who truly understand. Such conversations can provide reassurance and help you see your pathway as part of a collective experience, not something you're enduring alone.

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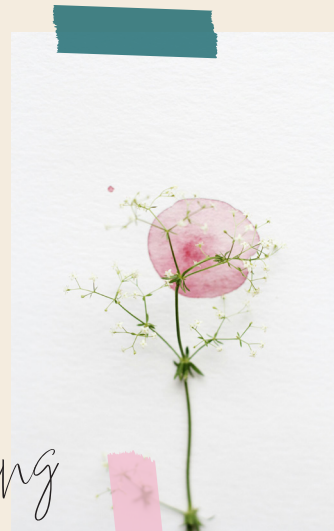
03

HORMONAL CHANGES & THEIR IMPACT ON BODY IMAGE

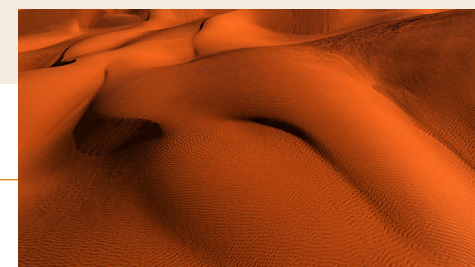
One of the most significant challenges women face during gynaecological cancer treatment is the impact of hormonal changes, which may be either temporary or permanent.

These hormonal shifts can bring about symptoms like hot flashes, night sweats, vaginal dryness, or changes in skin and hair texture, all of which may lead to feelings of frustration, loss, or imbalance. However, it's important to remember that this is all part of the healing process. It can help to have an open discussion with your doctor about managing such symptoms. Your doctor may suggest hormone replacement therapy or other treatments to alleviate some of the discomfort. For example, using vaginal moisturizers, lubricants, or prescription creams can help with vaginal dryness and discomfort during sex.

I am healing



LIFESTYLE ADJUSTMENTS LIKE STRESS-REDUCTION TECHNIQUES OR REGULAR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY CAN ALSO HELP MANAGE MOOD SWINGS AND HOT FLASHES.

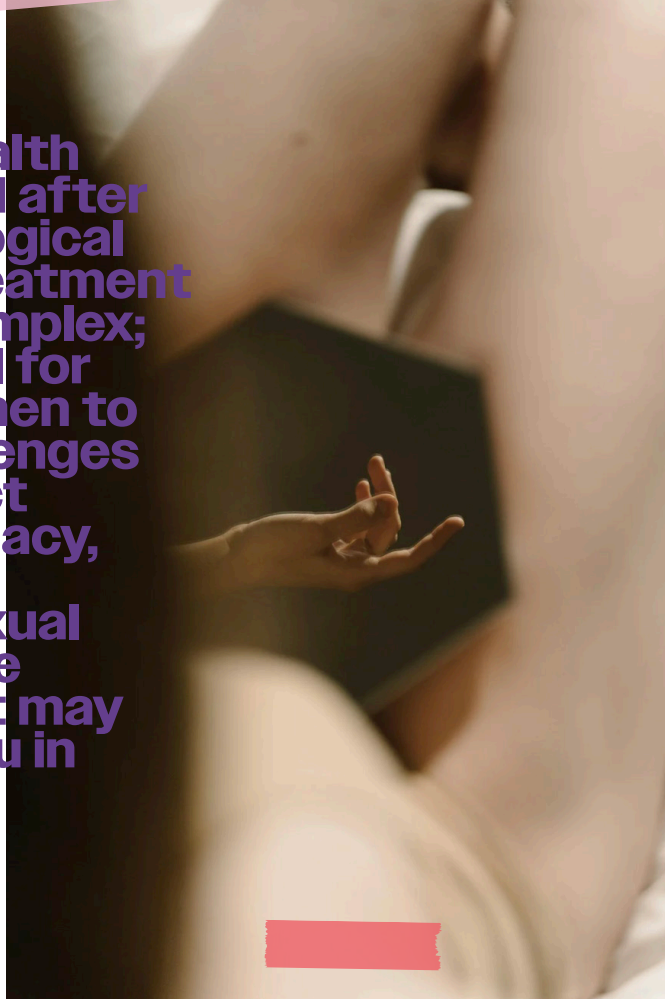


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04

INTIMACY, LIBIDO & SEXUAL HEALTH DURING & AFTER TREATMENT

Sexual health during and after gynaecological cancer treatment can be complex; it's normal for many women to face challenges that affect their intimacy, libido, and overall sexual health. The treatment may impact you in numerous ways:



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Changes in Libido



Hormonal treatments, emotional stress, and physical changes can all lead to reduced libido. Many women may find that their desire for sex is diminished due to the physical and emotional burden of treatment. It's important to acknowledge that reduced libido is a common issue, and it doesn't mean that your sexual identity is lost. This phase may just be temporary, and there are many ways to address it.

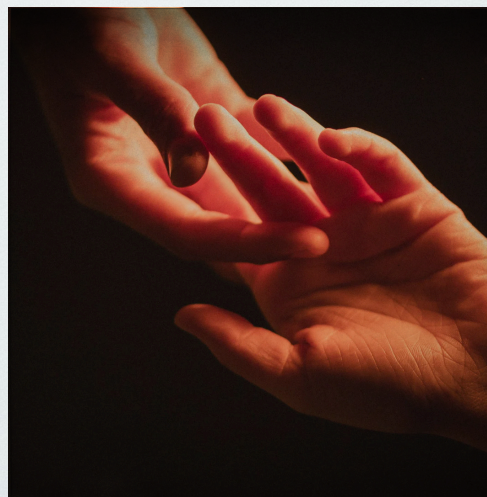
*Everything feels
so different...*

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Vaginal Dryness and Pain During Sex

One of the most common side effects of gynaecological cancer treatment is vaginal dryness, which can lead to painful intercourse. Lubricants and vaginal moisturizers can help alleviate this issue. Some women find that using vaginal dilators, which are designed to help maintain vaginal elasticity, can also be helpful in managing discomfort.





Reconnecting with Your Partner

Cancer treatment can change how you relate to your partner, and it may take time to reconnect physically and emotionally. Open and honest communication is essential — letting your partner know how you're feeling both physically and emotionally can help ease uncertainty and strengthen your bond. It's okay to take a step back if you're not ready for intercourse. Intimacy doesn't have to mean sexual intercourse — cuddling, kissing, and even holding hands can provide closeness and reassurance while you navigate these changes together. At the same time, partners may struggle with their own feelings of guilt — worrying about desiring intimacy while you're still healing or feeling unsure about how to support you. Talking openly about these emotions can help both of you feel heard, respected, and reassured as you move forward at your own pace.

Do whatever feels right for you!

Difficulty Reaching Orgasm

Hormonal changes and physical shifts can also impact your ability to achieve orgasm. It's important to communicate openly with your partner and to allow yourself time to explore what feels comfortable. Masturbation can be a healthy way to explore your body again and figure out what works for you. Sexual aids like vibrators or satisfiers can also enhance pleasure and help regain a sense of intimacy and self-connection.



Handle with care!



Therapy & Counselling

If concerns about sexual health continue, or if intimacy feels difficult or disconnected, speaking to a therapist who specializes in cancer-related sexual health may be beneficial. A therapist can help both you and your partner navigate your evolving sexual relationship. They can guide you in exploring ways to feel comfortable with intimacy again and provide practical exercises to help you reconnect.



05



NAVIGATING PHYSICAL BARRIERS & STRESS IN SEXUAL RECOVERY

Some physical changes during and after treatment — **such as pelvic adhesions, scarring, or pain during penetration** — can cause not only discomfort, but also emotional distress.

It's common to feel anxiety, fear, or even grief when facing such challenges.

Talk openly!

Talk openly with your care team about ways to ease this process. Support options may include pain management, pelvic floor physical therapy, relaxation techniques, or counselling. You're not expected to navigate this alone — there are tools, strategies, and professionals ready to support you. While employing devices such as vaginal dilators may prove effective, using them may also bring up a mix of emotions — stress, frustration, or feelings of vulnerability are all common. **If the process feels difficult or discouraging, please know that you are not failing.** For example, it may be helpful to reframe a dilator as a rehabilitation tool — not a test of progress, but a gentle aid in physical healing. Remember, reclaiming your sexual self is not only about physical tools — it's also about feeling safe, supported, and respected throughout your healing path.

06

self-love!



**REBUILDING
YOUR INTIMATE
CONNECTION**

*& RECLAIMING
YOUR SEXUALITY*

Healing your sexual health during and after gynaecological cancer treatment is not only about addressing physical changes – it's also about rebuilding **your sense of intimacy and sexuality.**

Remember, it's okay to not jump immediately back into sexual intercourse. Take the time you need and know that there are ways to rebuild intimacy with your partner, both emotionally and physically. Small steps like exploring new forms of touch, deepening emotional connections, and experimenting with new forms of intimacy can foster a healthier sexual relationship as you recover.

Also, don't forget the importance of self-love. Masturbation can be an important tool for self-exploration and help you become familiar with your body's new sensations. Many women find it empowering to take time for themselves and explore their own pleasure without the pressure of performance. Introducing different sex toys can help increase sexual satisfaction and reduce pain or dryness during intercourse.



08

**HEALING
THE WHOLE YOU:**
RECONNECTING WITH
YOUR INNER STRENGTH

Healing from
gynaecological
cancer is about
more than just
addressing
physical
changes —
it's about
**reconnecting
with your body,
mind, and spirit.**

The emotional pathway can
be just as challenging as the
physical one, but there are
many ways to reclaim a sense
of normalcy and rebuild your
confidence.



celebrate the body!

You have the strength
to not only heal but to
embrace the new version
of yourself. It's important
to continue nurturing
your emotional well-being
through practices like
mindfulness, journaling,
or spending time with
supportive friends and
family. You are resilient,
and with time, you will
rediscover your sense of
self and sexual vitality.
Your body is undergoing
change, but it is still
your own, and it remains
strong.

**STAY CONNECTED
TO THE PARTS
OF YOURSELF
THAT MAKE YOU
FEEL POWERFUL,
BEAUTIFUL, AND
WHOLE. KNOW THAT
WITH TIME, YOU'LL
FIND NEW WAYS
TO CELEBRATE
YOUR BODY AND
YOUR SEXUALITY,
EMBRACING THE
HEALING PROCESS
ALONG THE WAY.**

Affirmations



Positivity

My body is strong and capable, and I am learning to love it through its changes.

I am more than my appearance. I am a whole, beautiful person, inside and out.

I am deserving of love, compassion, and intimacy in all aspects of my life.

I am reconnecting with my body and my sexuality in a healthy, empowering way.

My sexual well-being is important, and I am open to exploring new ways to connect with my partner.

I trust that my relationship with my partner will grow stronger as we navigate these changes together.

It's okay to take things slowly and communicate openly about my needs and boundaries.

The changes in my body reflect my courage and are a part of my story, not my identity.

I give myself permission to explore intimacy at my own pace and in ways that feel right for me.

I am worthy of love, connection, and intimacy in every stage of my healing pathway.

My sexuality is a natural and beautiful part of who I am, even as I adapt to changes.

Intimacy is about connection and care — there's no 'right way,' only what feels right for me.