

Pelvic Health After Breast Cancer



THE
PETER GILGAN
CENTRE
FOR WOMEN'S
CANCERS



Introduction

Has your breast cancer treatment impacted your bladder, sexual and/or pelvic function? Have you found this challenging to discuss with your healthcare team? If so, you are not alone. Anywhere between 50 to 70 per cent of women will experience these kinds of issues after treatment.¹

Breast cancer treatments that lead to lower levels of estrogen in the body can induce symptoms similar to menopause. Estrogen is important for vaginal health because it keeps the tissues plump, pliable and lubricated. But hormone treatment, chemotherapy and/or ovary suppression or removal can all decrease estrogen levels in the body. Lower estrogen levels can lead to the thinning of vaginal tissues, vaginal dryness, burning, itching, an increased urge to urinate, the leakage of urine, recurring urinary tract infections, pelvic pressure, discomfort and pain with sexual activity. Collectively, all of these changes are called “genito-urinary syndrome of menopause” (GSM).² Effects of low estrogen may also cause other menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes, night sweats, mood changes and joint pains.² Joint pains can also be a troubling side effect and researchers believe that this is caused by estrogen depletion, although we do not yet have clear scientific evidence.^{3,4}

Although the symptoms are similar to menopause, the treatments can be different as estrogen-related medications typically cannot be used in women who have had hormone positive breast cancer.² There is a lot that you and your healthcare team can do to address these symptoms. Do not hesitate to start the conversation with your family doctor, gynecologist, oncology team, sex therapist or physiotherapist who specializes in pelvic floor issues.

Help yourself by following these 10 tips:

1. Use moisturizers and lubricants for your pelvic floor muscles
2. Do pelvic floor exercises
3. Exercise in general
4. Make some dietary changes
5. Consider seeing a pelvic floor physiotherapist
6. Learn about proper skin care for your genitals
7. Do not be afraid of sexual activity
8. Talk about prescription treatments for vaginal health with your doctor
9. Reach out for emotional support if needed
10. Educate yourself with trusted resources

1. Use moisturizers and lubricants for your pelvic floor muscles

Vaginal Moisturizers

- Are non-hormonal products that replenish vaginal moisture to improve elasticity and tissue quality
- Relieve symptoms of dryness, itching, burning and pain in the vaginal area⁵
- Provide relief by increasing the water content of cells in the vaginal canal and lowering the pH in the vagina to maintain moisture and acidity⁵

You can apply vaginal moisturizers regularly (three or more times per week)⁶ inside the vagina and/or around the external genitalia, preferably before bedtime. Examples include Mae by Damiva®, MoisturePom®, Repagyn®, Gynatrof® and Replens®. You can also use vitamin E oil, almond oil and coconut oil. Coconut oil's slightly higher pH value can potentially increase the risk of urinary tract infections or create an environment that kills good bacteria, so monitor carefully if using. DO NOT use petroleum-based products like Vaseline, body lotion or massage oils in your genital area because they can cause yeast infections and break down condoms.^{7,8}

Vaginal Lubricants

- Allow tissues to become more slippery during sexual activity
- Work by creating a protective layer on fragile tissues to avoid friction (unlike moisturizers, lubricants are not absorbed into the skin)
- Provide temporary relief during intercourse, intimate massage or self-pleasure

You may apply lubricants before and during sexual activity. Examples include Slippery Stuff®, Yes®, Good Clean Love® and Sliquid®. There are water-based, oil-based and silicone-based lubricants. See the table below for their specific uses, benefits and drawbacks. AVOID lubricants that contain glycerine, parabens or alcohol.^{5,9}

Type of Lubricant	Benefits	Drawbacks	Notes
Water-based	Do not stain sheets Can be used with dilators and/or toy	Do not stay slippery as long May need to be reapplied more frequently than other types of lubricants	Choose a lubricant in osmotic range of 285-295mOsm/kg. If higher than this range they tend to draw the water content of our vaginal tissues out Lubricant should be in pH range of 3.5-4.5 (mimicking your vaginal canal)
Silicone-based	Longer lasting Can be used with non-silicone dilators	Stain bedding More costly Cannot be used with latex products including condoms and/or toys	Lubricants should be in pH range of 3.5-4.5 (mimicking your vaginal canal)
Oil-based	Olive oil and coconut lubricants are popular and easily accessible	Can break down condoms Can stain bedding	Lubricants should be in pH range of 3.5-4.5 (mimicking your vaginal canal)

2. Do pelvic floor exercises

Engaging in pelvic floor exercises can help stimulate blood flow to the area and keep the tissues healthy. Your pelvic floor is a group of muscles that create a “hammock” from your pubic bone to your tailbone. These muscles are involved in:

- Breathing and core strength
- Bladder and bowel control
- Sexual function
- Abdominal organ support

Start with finding your pelvic floor muscles by doing the “kegel”. Imagine you are trying to stop the flow of urine and gas by closing (squeezing the pelvic floor muscles) around each hole including the urethra, vagina and anus, and/or pretend you are pulling a blueberry in your vagina up towards the belly button. Your bum, legs and stomach muscles should be relaxed. Between each squeeze of the pelvic floor muscles, relax the muscles fully. If you are having difficulty finding the muscles, a pelvic health physiotherapist can help you. There are also a number of online resources and books that you can use to learn how to activate the pelvic floor muscles.



3. Exercise

Exercising, including walking, swimming or other activities that raise your heart rate, will help enhance your overall health. Choose something you enjoy, then build up the time and intensity slowly and comfortably. Your ultimate goal should be 30 minutes of activity, five times per week. Adding two sessions of lifting weights to your exercise routine can boost your health even more. Studies show that building muscle mass can help improve the joint pains from hormone treatment for breast cancer and enhance heart and bone health.¹⁰



4. Make changes to your diet

Some foods and drinks can aggravate the bladder and increase leakage or the feeling of urgency with urination. These include alcohol, caffeine, pop/soda, spicy foods, artificial sweeteners, citrus fruits and juices. It is also important that you try to avoid constipation. Normal bowel movements can be as often as three times a day and as little as once every three days. When stools become hard, dry and difficult to pass it may be a sign you are constipated.

There are things you can do to optimize bowel function including:

- Breathing to consciously relax the pelvic floor
- Eating more fruits and vegetables (follow Canada's food guide)
- Drinking more water
- Eating less meat
- Exercising



5. Consider seeing a pelvic floor physiotherapist

Pelvic floor rehabilitation for pelvic issues may include treatments such as:¹¹

- Trigger point and myofascial release
- Relaxation techniques and conscious control of pelvic floor muscles
- Dilator program
- Education on vulvar care
- Lubrication
- Sexual positioning

Pelvic floor physiotherapists are also important in helping with bowel and bladder training.¹¹ See a qualified pelvic floor physiotherapist for a customized pelvic floor exercise program that is best for your pelvic floor muscles.

6. Learn about proper skin care for your genitals

- Avoid using soap on your vulva as it can be drying. All you need is water to wash. Do not use douching products; the vagina is able to self-clean.
- Wear cotton underwear to allow the skin to breathe. Avoid wearing underwear at night.
- If you have sensitive skin, use unscented menstrual pads that are cotton based or organic during your menses.
- Do not use menstrual pads for bladder leakage. Menstrual pads wick away moisture and can be drying. They should only be used during menstruation.
- Wipe front to back after each bowel movement.

7. Do not be afraid of sexual activity

Engaging in sexual activity either with a partner or with yourself can help stimulate the tissues, facilitate natural lubrication and increase blood flow to the area. Use a lubricant if needed to prevent irritation of dry tissues.¹²

Sexual desire (sometimes called libido) is your interest in sex. Desire can range from being not at all interested in sex to having a very active desire for sex. Libido varies from person to person and can change over time.¹

Many different factors can affect sexual desire, especially your state of mind. In particular, stress, fatigue, pain and changes to sex hormone levels can reduce your sexual desire. To learn more about improving your libido, please visit the Canadian Cancer Society's website at www.cancer.ca or call 1-888-939-3333.¹³ Seeing a sex therapist can also help improve your libido and other symptoms you may be having.¹

8. Talk about prescription treatments for vaginal health with your provider

Oral and patch estrogen and progestogen therapy is not recommended in women who have had breast cancer because hormones may increase the risk of new breast cancer or recurrence. Vaginal estrogen may be recommended in some cases by your family physician or gynecologist.¹²

9. Reach out for emotional support if needed

Some women may find that their emotional health is impacted by the effects of breast cancer treatment on their bladder, sexual and pelvic function. It is understandable and normal to experience a range of emotions. Speak with your healthcare team about accessing psychosocial support for your mental health.



10. Educate yourself with trusted resources

Less estrogen from treatments can cause a number of other menopausal symptoms, including hot flashes, night sweats, joint pains and mood changes. The North American Menopause Society has a number of resources and book reviews that provide information about how to deal with these uncomfortable symptoms.¹⁴

Glossary:

estrogen – a hormone that is important for sexual and reproductive development, mainly in women

genito-urinary syndrome of menopause – various menopausal symptoms and signs including genital symptoms (dryness, burning and irritation), sexual symptoms (lack of lubrication, discomfort or pain, and impaired function), and urinary symptoms (an increased urge to urinate, the leakage of urine and recurring urinary tract infections)

libido – overall sexual drive or desire for sexual activity

pH – a scale used to specify the acidity of a water-based solution

psychosocial support – support that includes mental health counselling, education, group support and other such services

Resources:

1. The Peter Gilgan Centre for Women's Cancers

Website: womenscollegehospital.ca/PeterGilganCentre

Phone: 416-323-6400 ext. 5987

2. The Breast Centre at Women's College Hospital

Website: womenscollegehospital.ca/breast-centre

Phone: 416-323-6225

3. Canadian Cancer Society

Website: cancer.ca *Look for the peer match program

Phone: 1-888-939-3333

4. Pelvic Health Solutions

Website: pelvichealthsolutions.ca

Email: info@pelvichealthsolutions.ca

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