

Sexual health is an important aspect of survivorship for young adult (YA) cancer survivors, who frequently experience physical and psychosocial changes related to sexuality and intimacy during and after treatment for cancer. This article provides an overview of common sexual issues in this population, reviews the integral role that oncology nursing assessment and intervention can play in optimizing patients' sexual well-being and quality of life, and describes specific strategies for incorporating the sexual health needs of YA cancer survivors into the nursing plan of care.

AT A GLANCE

- Young women and men with reproductive and nonreproductive malignancies commonly report sexual problems, have questions about sexuality after cancer treatment, and desire practical guidance in dealing with these concerns.
- Oncology nurses should inquire about the sexual health needs of YA cancer survivors regularly throughout the treatment trajectory as a part of routine nursing assessment.
- Education and counseling on contraception, safer sex practices, and sexual communication skills are important nursing interventions that can be used to promote sexual wellness and healthy decision-making in this population.

KEYWORDS

young adults; quality of life; survivorship; sexual health; oncology nursing

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Sexual Health

A nursing approach to supporting the needs of young adult cancer survivors

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According to the American Cancer Society (2019), an estimated 630,000 young adult (YA) cancer survivors are living in the United States, with an additional 80,000 YAs expected to receive a new diagnosis of cancer each year (American Cancer Society, 2020). Despite evidence that sexual concerns are common in this population (Jones et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2018; Mütsch et al., 2019), YA cancer survivors consistently report receiving insufficient information from their healthcare providers regarding sexual health (Cherven et al., 2020). This gap in care contributes to confusion surrounding cancer-related sexual problems and the prevalence of unanswered questions about sexuality among young survivors, and constitutes an opportunity for oncology nurses to address this unmet need within the context of comprehensive survivorship care (McGrady et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2018).

Sexuality in Young Adult Cancer Survivors

Recognized by the World Health Organization (2021) as a core dimension of health, sexuality is a multifaceted concept consisting of biologic, behavioral, cognitive, and relational components. Young adulthood (ages 18–39 years) spans a broad range of sexual milestones, including sexual identity formation, exploration of sexual preferences and practices, the development of romantic partnerships, and family planning (Aubin & Perez, 2015; Katz, 2018; Stanton et al., 2018).

The alterations in physical functioning, sensation, and appearance that occur with multiple cancer treatment modalities can lead to an array of sexual problems in young male and female survivors with both reproductive and nonreproductive cancers (Jones et al., 2020; Mütsch et al., 2019; Stanton et al., 2018), who report decreases in sexual desire, changes in arousal and orgasm, dyspareunia, and reduced sexual satisfaction after cancer treatment (Cherven et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2018; Stanton et al., 2018). Emotional and interpersonal challenges that influence sexual functioning in YA cancer survivors include distress related to infertility, poor body image, and difficulty with peer and romantic relationships (Aubin & Perez, 2015; Rabin, 2019; Stanton et al., 2018). YA cancer survivors report feeling less attractive and less desirable after treatment (Stanton et al., 2018), fearing romantic rejection and difficulty with disclosing their cancer status or history (Cherven et al., 2020; Katz, 2018; Rabin, 2019), and avoiding dating and intimacy (Aubin & Perez, 2015; Rabin, 2019). YA cancer survivors in current relationships also report disruptive changes to their sexual lives (Jones et al., 2020; Stanton et al., 2018) and higher rates of relationship dissolution in comparison to their peers without cancer (Aubin & Perez, 2015).

Evidence-Based Management

Evidence-based clinical guidelines specific to sexuality in YA cancer survivors are limited (Cherven et al., 2020; Fridgen et al., 2017; National Comprehensive Cancer Network [NCCN], 2020). In 2016, as part of the first