

# The Importance of Assessing Sexuality: A Patient Perspective

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A cancer diagnosis can have an overwhelming effect on patients' sexuality. Patients can suffer physically and emotionally from the side effects of cancer treatments. Nurses and physicians often fail to recognize the importance of the sexuality assessment to patients. The purpose of this article is to discuss sexuality from the perspectives of patients with cancer. Fifty-two patients were asked to define sexuality and its meaning to them. The results demonstrated that patients' definitions of sexuality can take on many different meanings. Only a small number of patients stated that sexuality was addressed by their nurse or physician. Many patients wished someone had asked them about or brought up the topic of sexuality. The results support the value and importance of performing a sexuality assessment in patients with cancer.

A cancer diagnosis can be devastating to a patient, affecting many aspects of his or her daily routine. Patient sexuality can be significantly altered by cancer and cancer treatment (Hughes, 2000). The cancer diagnosis, surgical procedures, chemotherapy, radiation, and hormonal treatments may cause lifelong changes to sexuality. The effects can be as disturbing as the cancer diagnosis, making the issue of sexuality an important and often overlooked assessment. Incorporating the appropriate questions into a nursing assessment gives patients an opportunity to voice their concerns regarding sexual health.

## The Nurse/Patient Relationship

Patients with cancer are physically and psychologically challenged in their fight to survive and regain normalcy in their lives, including reestablishing their identity as a sexual person. The constant contact nurses have with patients provides an opportunity to discuss sexuality and ensure the same priority is given as with other health issues (Kralik, Koch, & Telford, 2001). Oncology nurses always have been known to be strong advocates for their patients, partnering with them to achieve quality of life during treatment. Assessment and management of patients' side effects and potential issues with treatment always have been a top priority in this specialty. When managing the issues that come with a cancer diagnosis, the issue of sexuality and its impact on patients is of critical importance to patients' emotional and physical stability. This article will explore a survey conducted regarding patients' thoughts about sexuality. The results will help inform nurses as to what is important to patients and help establish open communication, which will then lead to positive effects on patient well-being.

### At a Glance

- ◆ Nurses and physicians often fail to recognize the importance of sexuality assessments to patients.
- ◆ The definition of sexuality differs greatly among patients.
- ◆ Surveyed patients wished someone had either asked about or addressed sexuality with them.

## Defining Sexuality and Sexual Health

Sexuality or sexual functioning are broad terms that include social, emotional, and physical components. Partner issues such as the couple's sexual history, the partner's ability to function sexually, communication issues, and marital stresses are important factors to consider (Barton, Wilwerding, Carpenter, & Loprinzi, 2004). The World Health Organization's (WHO's) definition of sexuality is: "A central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, and social well-being that relates to one's sexuality" (WHO, 2002). The way people experience and express sexuality is different for each individual and can be influenced by biologic, psychological, social, cultural, and religious factors. WHO defined sexual health as: "Physical,

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