

Sexual side effects of cancer treatment often unaddressed with female patients

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A new study finds that sexual side effects of cancer treatment are discussed far less frequently with female patients than with male patients, even when the treatment directly affects sex organs. Among

patients receiving brachytherapy for prostate or cervical cancer at a high-volume cancer center, 9 in 10 men were asked about their sexual health, compared to 1 in 10 women. The study, which also found a smaller but similar disparity in clinical trials nationwide, will be presented at the American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO) Annual Meeting.

Findings point to an opportunity for physicians to gain a better understanding of their patients' experiences with [cancer treatment](#).

"There seems to be a big disparity in the way we approach [sexual dysfunction](#) with our patients, where female patients are asked about sexual issues much less often than male patients are," said Jamie Takayesu, MD, lead author of the study and a radiation oncology [resident physician](#) at the University of Michigan Rogel Cancer Center in Ann Arbor, Mich. "Equally importantly, we see this trend on a national level in clinical trials."

Each year, roughly 13,000 new cases of cervical cancer and more than 220,000 new cases of prostate cancer are diagnosed in the U.S. Both diseases respond well to [radiation therapy](#) and other treatments, and an estimated 96% of patients with prostate cancer and 67% with cervical cancer survive at least five years after their diagnosis.

Because these patients often can expect to live a long time after treatment, the potential for long-term side effects including sexual dysfunction is important to consider, said Dr. Takayesu. With [brachytherapy](#) for prostate or cervical cancer, doctors insert radioactive sources directly into the tumor, which can cause toxicity to the organs in the genital region.

Roughly half of the women who receive cervical brachytherapy experience sexual side effects, most commonly changes to vaginal tissue and dryness that can cause pain and discomfort. Between a quarter and half of the men who receive prostate brachytherapy will experience

erectile dysfunction. Side effects can occur during, after or well after treatment.

The study design combined a retrospective analysis of institutional data with an analysis of national clinical trials. For the institutional analysis, researchers reviewed consult notes in the records of 201 patients who were treated with brachytherapy for prostate cancer (n=75) or cervical cancer (n=136) between 2010 and 2021.

They found a stark difference between how many male versus female patients were asked about sexual health at their initial consult—89% of men, compared to 13% of women (p

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