



Coping[®]

WITH CANCER

Dating during and after cancer treatment, whether you are single, divorced, or widowed, raises complex questions such as *When do I start to date? How do I disclose my cancer and treatment history? How will I cope with my date's response?*

You may be asking these questions because you are single and have not met that someone special or because you are separated, divorced, or widowed and ready to date again. With survival rates improving for many forms of cancer, you may very well want to begin dating or start dating again. Here are seven tips for dating during or after your cancer care.

1 Not sure how to meet someone to date? Consider letting friends know that you would like to start dating again and ask them to introduce you to their single friends and colleagues. Also, return to your favorite activities or try new ones. Consider joining a group in your community or volunteering for an organization. Take a course for fun or credit. Connect with your alumni association. Attend events and accept invitations to parties or other networking opportunities. You may also want to try online dating sites.

2 Watch out for "automatic" negative beliefs and false assumptions about possible dates. First, do not assume that your date will automatically reject you when he or she finds out about your cancer. Also, once



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you have had cancer, it is easy to forget that other women and men may have medical, not to mention personal, problems as well. Your date could also have (or have had) cancer or another chronic condition such as diabetes. Don't just focus on your cancer history. In this day and age, as relationships become more serious, we have to talk about sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and herpes, whether we are 28 or 78.



Seven Tips for Dating after a Cancer Diagnosis

by Helen L. Coons, PhD, ABPP

3 Seek support from family, friends, and other adults with cancer before and after dating. Are you unsure when and how to disclose your cancer history? Are you worried about the person's response? Try talking with a few trusted friends about your intent to date so you can bounce ideas around and discuss your concerns before you date and your reactions after meeting someone. If you are a young person with cancer, you may

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want to meet with other young adults with cancer to receive support for sexuality, fertility, and other related concerns, as you may feel quite different from other young adults without a cancer history.

4 Cancer and its treatment can often take a toll on mood, body image, sexual energy, and/or sexual functioning. Actively work to improve or restore these important areas of function before you start dating. Regular exercise, good nutrition, and maintaining a healthy weight can help with body image. If you are self-conscious about incisions, swelling, decreased use of an arm or leg, change in bowel function, a colostomy, or changes in sexual functioning, consider talking with a psychologist with expertise in working with adults with cancer about your concerns. Excellent options to improve mood, body image, and sexual health after cancer treatment are available.

5 Improve your relationship communication skills. If you meet someone special and move toward sexual intimacy, learn to communicate directly about changes in your body image and sexual functioning related to your cancer treatments.

6 Know what your priorities are in your life. What kind of person do you want to date? What is important to you in a relationship? Shared

values? Having the same interests? Remember that when things do not work out, it may not be because of your cancer history. The person you were with just may not have been who you were looking for.

7 Decide whether dating during cancer is really right for you. It is certainly normal to want a healthy, loving relationship, especially when we face an uncertain future. However, dating in the context of cancer is a very personal decision and may or may not be right for you.

You have the courage to live with cancer, so you have the courage to date. If you feel you are ready to date, make a dating plan and take action today.

Editor's Note: Dr. Helen Coons is a clinical health psychologist in Philadelphia, PA. She specializes in the care of women across the life span with early and advanced cancer and regularly speaks to national audiences on dating, sexual health, and other topics of interest to adults with cancer. ■