

Breast Cancer survivors' experiences with sexual health prior to vaginal laser treatment- a qualitative study

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Background: Breast cancer survivors (BCSs) are a growing population, and 50–75% experience genitourinary syndrome of menopause (GSM) with sexual dysfunction. Vaginal dryness, dyspareunia, and reduced desire intersect with altered body image and psychosocial strain, affecting intimacy and quality of life negatively. Treatment options are limited, as hormone therapy is often contraindicated or avoided. Vaginal laser therapy is a non-hormonal new intervention, yet BCS' perspectives on sexual health prior laser treatment remain underexplored.

Aim: To explore how Danish BCSs experience sexual health challenges and unmet needs after cancer treatment and before vaginal laser therapy.

Methods: Guided by Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 purposively sampled BCSs (aged 41–74, single and partnered) at Aarhus University Hospital. Data was analyzed using a five-step hermeneutic approach inspired by Kvale and Brinkmann.

Results: Three themes emerged: (1) **Cessation of sexual desire** — women described a sudden loss of sexual desire involving both physical and emotional components; (2) **Becoming a eunuch** — women felt “castrated” in terms of sensuality and sexuality, also described as being disabled or feeling like “half a woman”, they described being unable to meet their own expectations of womanhood, which led to distress, isolation, and loneliness; and (3) **Regaining mutual partnership—but being incapable** — physical changes, emotional strain, internal and external conflicts, intimacy avoidance, pressure around sex, and mismatched needs prevented women from re-establishing the mutual partnership they once had with their partners.

Conclusion: Findings in the study underline the need for a more proactive, holistic, and patient-centered approach across oncology and women's health services to support sexual rehabilitation and generate future patient-centered interventions.