Physical intimacy can contribute significantly to a person’s well-being, but oncology clinicians rarely discuss sexuality with their patients. Lack of knowledge and personal discomfort are widely acknowledged barriers. This article addresses these barriers by outlining steps patients can take during treatment to ensure safe sexual activity. Most patients can be sexually active during treatment, but they need to use safe sexual practices. Patients need to prevent pregnancy, protect themselves from infection, and, if concerned, avoid partner exposure to chemotherapy in semen or vaginal fluids. This article outlines issues to consider when educating patients about sexual activity during cancer treatment and describes strategies for oncology nurses to feel more comfortable initiating these discussions with patients.

Contraception to Prevent Pregnancy

Exposure to chemotherapeutic agents or radiation can cause mutagenic changes in gametes and teratogenic effects in a developing fetus (Klein & Okuyama, 2012). Because of this, female patients of childbearing age and the female partners of male patients should avoid pregnancy during treatment. Women of childbearing age have many hormonal and nonhormonal options for safe and effective contraception. Contraceptive methods are categorized for safety based on risk when used by women with specific medical conditions (American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists [ACOG], 2011; Workowski & Berman, 2010). Only options that pose minimal risk to patients based on their cancer diagnosis and medical history should be considered. Contraceptive methods are rated for efficacy based on the percentage of women who have an unintended pregnancy during the first year of use, differentiating between typical use and perfect use (Trussell, 2011) (see Table 1). Only options with high efficacy should be suggested, and education on correct usage must be provided to ensure effectiveness.

A variety of options should be offered to allow for patient preferences and lifestyle considerations. Many hormonal and nonhormonal options should be offered to allow for patient preferences and lifestyle considerations.