

# Outside the Pelvis: The Role of Rehab in Addressing Cancer-Related Sexual Dysfunction

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# Relevant Disclosures

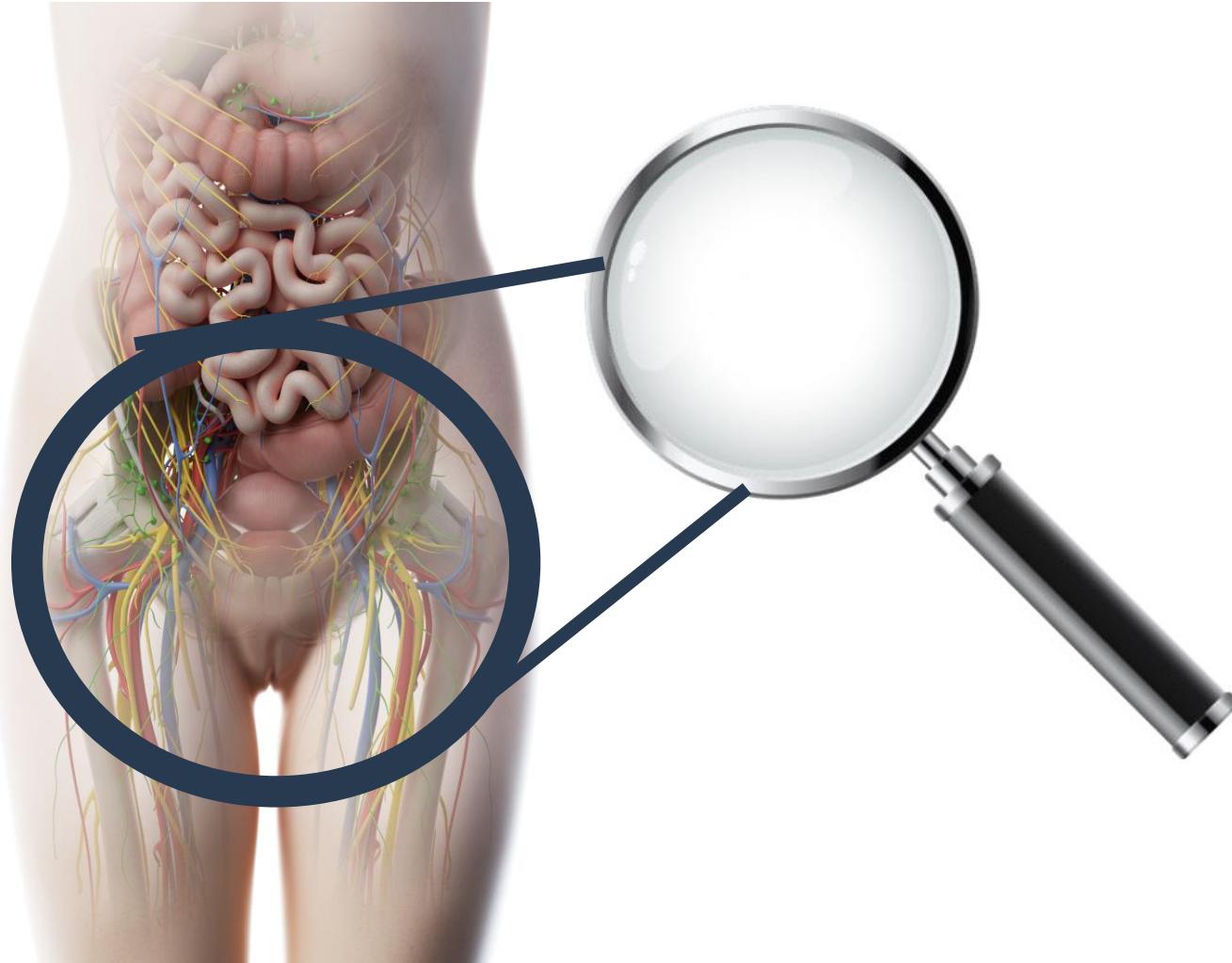
- Owner of OncoPelvic PT, LLC
- Affiliate with LympheDIVAS and Prairie Wear



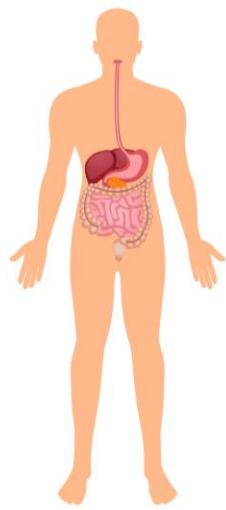
# Objectives

By the end of this course, the learner will be able to:

1. Understand common sexual health side effects from cancer treatment
2. Describe rehab assessment considerations for cancer-related sexual dysfunction
3. Discuss rehab interventions to address cancer-related sexual dysfunction



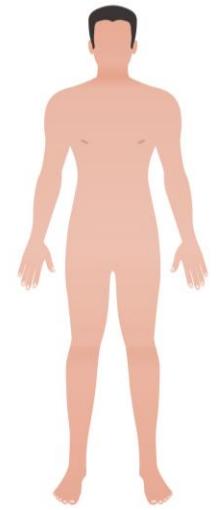
*image: a cis-female body with pelvic organs circled  
and a magnifying glass focused on the pelvis*



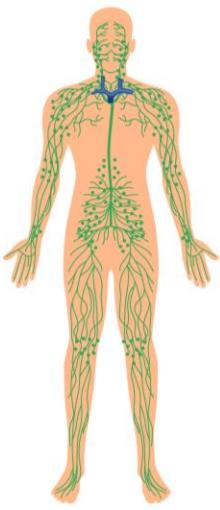
Digestive System



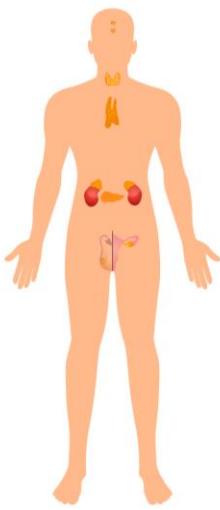
Muscular System



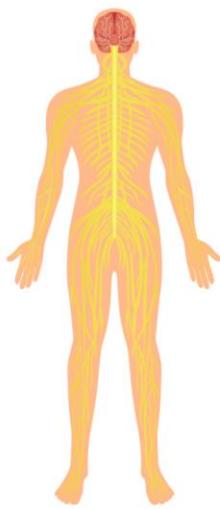
Integumentary System



Lymphatic System



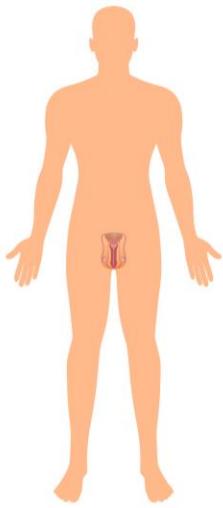
Endocrine System



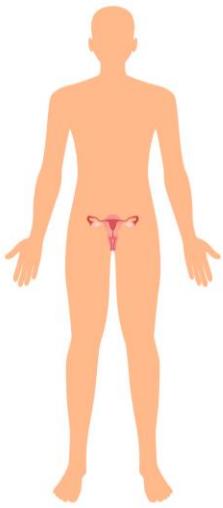
Nervous System



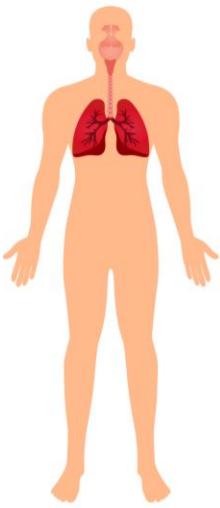
Skeletal system



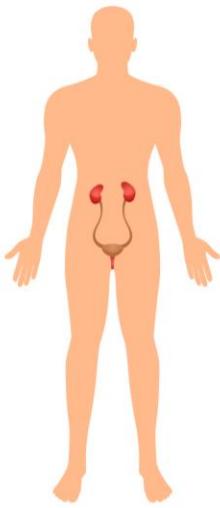
Male Reproductive System



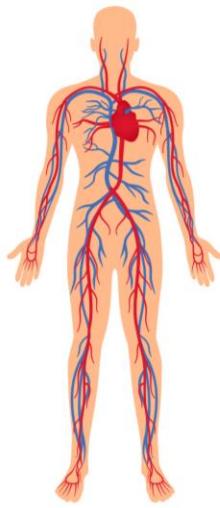
Female Reproductive System



Respiratory system



Urinary System



Circulatory system



# Types of Cancer Treatment

Surgery

Radiation  
Therapy

Chemotherapy

Hormone  
Therapy

Immunotherapy

Targeted  
Therapies



# Surgery

- Considerations:
  - Goal of Surgery
  - Location
  - Reconstruction, Revision
  - Lymph Node Removal



*Image: Breast cancer survivor who had a Mastectomy and TRAM flap reconstruction*



# Impact of Surgery on Sexual Health

- Pain
  - Limited range of motion
- Scar tissue
  - Limited mobility
- Lymphedema
  - Disfigurement
- Nerve injury
  - Communication (Rhoten 2020)
- Weakness



# Impact of Lymphedema on Sexual Health

**Breast cancer (Hoyle 2022, Radina 2015, Winch 2015)**

- The extent of lymphedema impacting sexual health depends on:
  - Swelling severity and location
  - Needing to wear a compression garment
  - Body image concerns



*Image: a White woman with lymphedema in the right arm. The left image is before treatment, and the right image is after treatment*



# Radiation Therapy

High energy x-rays that destroy local cancer cells by inhibiting cell growth and division

**Neo-Adjuvant**

Treatment started prior to surgery to shrink the tumor

**Adjuvant**

Treatment started after surgery to kill remaining cancer cells



# Impact of Radiation Therapy on Sexual Health

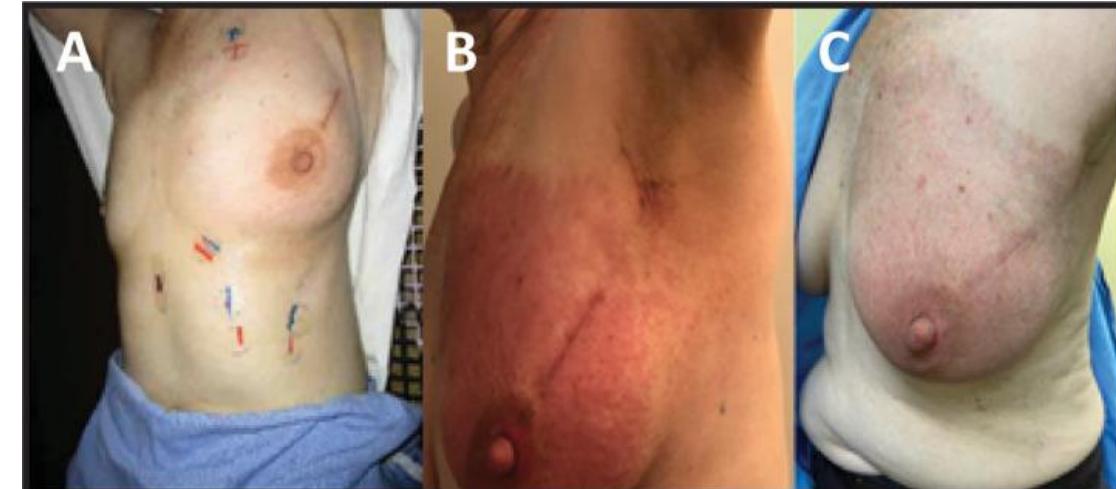
- Cancer related fatigue
- Radiation fibrosis
- Lymphedema
- Pain
- Limited range of motion
- Nerve injury
- Weakness
- Shortness of Breath
- Disfigurement, Body image
- Communication



# Impact of Radiation on Sexual Health

## Breast Cancer (Boswell 2015)

- Reduction in sexual function associated with:
  - Persistent breast pain
  - Arm and shoulder discomfort and loss of flexibility
  - Lymphedema



*Image: shows the breast of a patient with breast cancer before, during and after radiation therapy, demonstrating stages of radiation dermatitis*

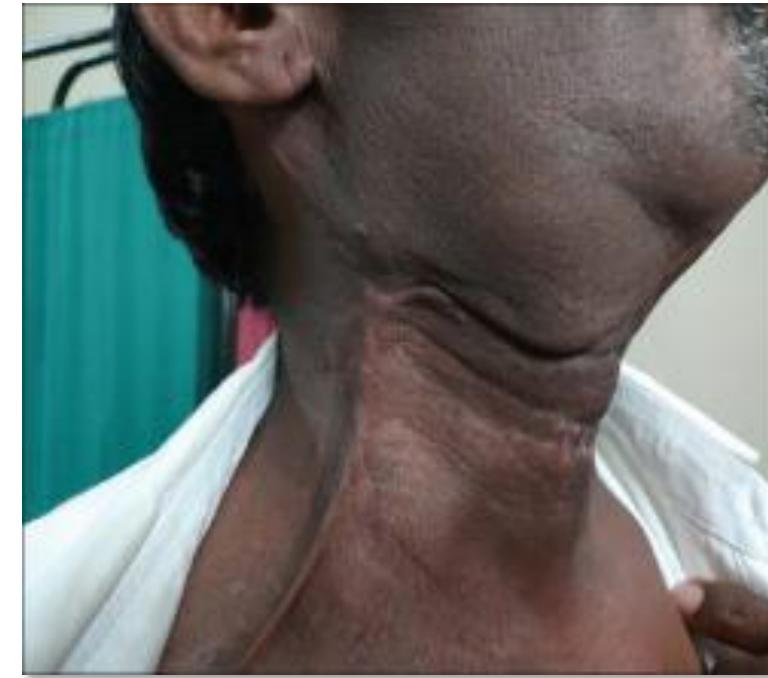
Laird J, Leventhal J, Kanowitz J, Damast S. Radiation Recall Dermatitis After Capecitabine in a Patient With Triple Negative Breast Cancer. Pract Radiat Oncol. 2021 Nov-Dec;11(6):448-452. doi: 10.1016/j.prro.2021.06.001. Epub 2021 Jun 23. PMID: 34157449.



# Impact of Surgery and Radiation on Sexual Health

**Head and Neck Cancer (Caswell 2021, Covrig 2021, Rhoten 2019)**

- Disfigurement can lead to lowered body image perception and limiting social interactions
- Physical limitations of facial nerve damage, impaired saliva production, communication, and limited cervical movement



*Image: depicts scar tissue and radiation fibrosis on the right side of the neck of a patient with head and neck cancer*

Purkayastha A, Sharma N, Sarin A, Bhatnagar S, Chakravarty N, Mukundan H, Suhag V, Singh S. Radiation Fibrosis Syndrome: the Evergreen Menace of Radiation Therapy. Asia Pac J Oncol Nurs. 2019 Jul-Sep;6(3):238-245.



# Chemotherapy

Any drug that systemically treats a disease for wide control

**Neo-Adjuvant**

Treatment started prior to surgery

**Adjuvant**

Treatment started after surgery



# Impact of Chemotherapy on Sexual Health

- Immunocompromised, low platelets
- Cancer Related Fatigue
- Changes in mood and libido
- Chemotherapy Induced Peripheral Neuropathy (CIPN)



# Impact of Chemotherapy on Sexual Health

## Various cancer diagnoses (Reimer 2023)

- Chemotherapy can cause sensory symptoms of the genital organs and sexual dysfunction by damaging genital organ nerve fibers
- Chemotherapy and hormonal therapy can trigger hormonal disruption leading to sexual dysfunction
- CIPN affects hands and feet, impacting use in sexual activity



*Image depicts stocking-glove distribution of CIPN*



# Hormone Therapy

Used for tumors that are fueled by hormones (estrogen, progesterone, or testosterone) to grow

Drugs or surgical interventions to reduce the amount of hormones in the body or stop them from acting on cancer cells.



# Impact of Hormone Therapy on Sexual Health

- Fatigue (Paiva 2016)
- Arthralgia (Blumer 2023)
- Changes in mood and libido
- Worsening menopause symptoms including hot flashes
- Weight gain → body image



# Targeted Therapy

Treatment that targets proteins that control how cancer cells grow, divide, and spread.





# Impact of Targeted Therapy on Sexual Health

## Lung Cancer (Florez 2023)

- Sexual Health Assessment in Women with Lung Cancer (SHAWL) Study
- Common reasons negatively affecting lung cancer survivors' satisfaction with their sex life: **fatigue 40%**, feeling sad/unhappy 28%, issues with partner 22%, and **shortness of breath 15%**



When should you start the conversation with cancer survivors?

Most patients want information about sexual health at the time of diagnosis and treatment planning

Rhoten 2020



# Subjective Examination

- Past medical, surgical, and social history
- h/o abuse, trauma, PTSD
- Review labs and imaging
- Cancer history
  - Primary cancer, location, stage, grade
  - Treatment (past, current, planned)
- Current symptoms
  - Chronicity
  - Severity
  - Present prior to cancer treatment?
  - Goals
- Screen for other concerns
  - Lymphedema
  - Neuropathy, balance
  - Cognition
  - Mental health



# Physical Examination

Posture

Range of Motion

Flexibility

Strength

Sensation

Cardiovascular

Tissue health

Edema, lymphedema



*Image: A physical therapist assesses the leg of a patient sitting at the edge of a table*



# Sexual Dysfunction Management

Multidisciplinary team

Education

Medications

Rehab

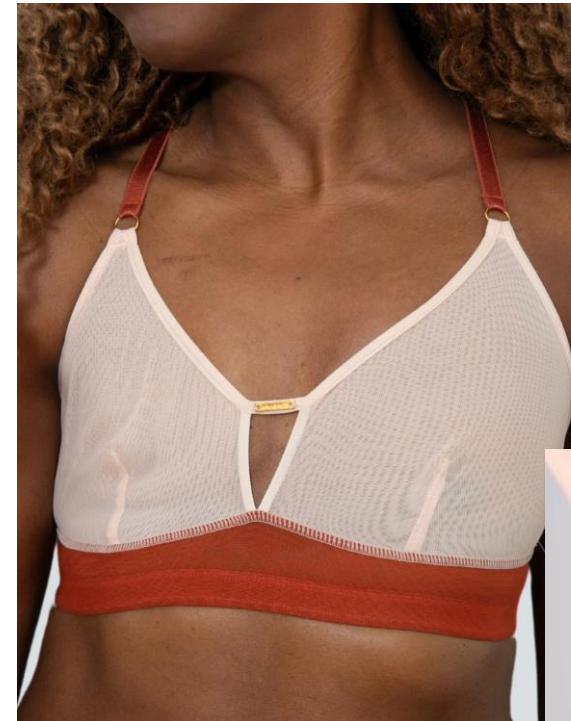


*Image: A medical provider talking with a patient*



# Address sensation and body image

- Desensitization (Harden 2001)
- Vibration (Lupowitz 2022)
- Find clothes and lingerie that are comfortable and assists with positive body image



AnaOno



OstomySecrets



# Manual Therapy

- Soft tissue mobilization
- Strain-Counterstrain
- Fibrosis techniques
- Scar mobilization

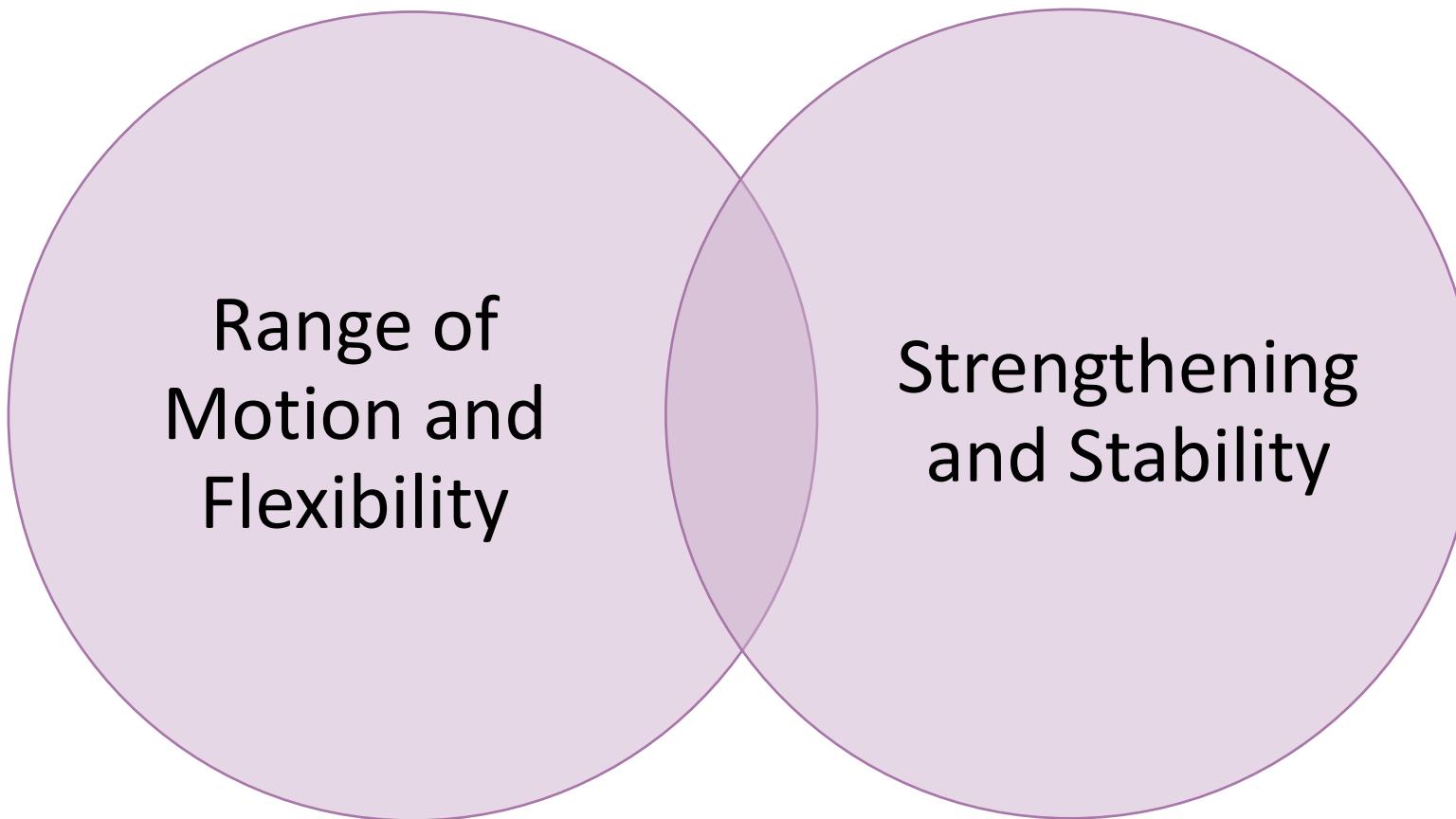


*Image: Breast cancer survivor who had a double mastectomy, placing right hand on chest*

Leung 2023, Pattanshetty 2022, Warpenburg 2021, Yao 2021



# Therapeutic Exercise



Range of  
Motion and  
Flexibility

Strengthening  
and Stability



# Impact of Physical Activity on Sexual Health

- Decreases stress and anxiety
- Improves body image
- Reduces cancer related fatigue
- Increased clitoral vascularization
- Lower odds of Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder and Genital Arousal Disorder



Maseroli 2021



# American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) Exercise Recommendations

**Aerobic:** 150 minutes of moderate intensity, 75 minutes of vigorous intensity, or a combination of the two, per week

**Resistance:** Twice per week of moderate intensity for each the major muscle groups



# Lymphedema Rehab

Refer to a Certified  
Lymphedema  
Therapist  
(CLT or CLT-LANA)



*Image: showing different compression garments including a compression bra, compression shorts, and compression sleeve, to treat lymphedema*

<https://www.lohmann-rauscher.com>

<https://www.juzo.com>

<https://www.lymphedivas.com>



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# Thank you!



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