

Patient information factsheet

Vaginal dilator therapy

Your doctor has recommended that you use vaginal dilators regularly once your radiotherapy treatment has finished. You may have had radiotherapy externally or internally (brachytherapy) or a combination of both for cancer.

We've written this factsheet to explain why your doctor has recommended this type of therapy and how to use the dilators. Your clinical nurse specialist or your treatment radiographer will also have given you some information about vaginal dilator therapy.

Why do we recommend vaginal dilator therapy?

One of the long-term side effects of radiotherapy for pelvic cancers is a change to the walls of the vagina. After treatment, it is common for the walls of the vagina to become narrower, the length to become shorter and for vaginal dryness to occur. This is called 'vaginal stenosis' and may vary in degree from person to person.

Vaginal stenosis can make sexual intercourse and internal examinations uncomfortable for you. Using vaginal dilators regularly can help to prevent vaginal stenosis.

When to start your vaginal dilators

We recommend that you start using your vaginal dilators when any soreness has settled. This is usually two to four weeks after your last radiotherapy or brachytherapy treatment, but it will vary depending on the area that was treated. Your clinical nurse specialist or therapy radiographer will advise you accordingly.

You will have a follow-up appointment with your consultant six weeks after your treatment has finished. At this appointment, you may need to have an internal examination so it is important that you have tried to use your vaginal dilators before this time. If you have been unable to use your vaginal dilators, you can discuss this with your consultant in more detail at the appointment.

How to use your vaginal dilators

Using your dilators regularly will give you the best results, so try to make it part of your routine. You could use them before or after a bath or shower, before bedtime or first thing in the morning.

Choose somewhere you can feel comfortable and relaxed. You may wish to lie on a bed on your back with your knees bent and legs slightly apart. You could also stand, raise one of your legs and insert the dilator like a tampon.

Before you start using the dilators you may want to try gently inserting a finger first with some lubricant. When you start using the dilators, start with the smallest size and insert gently into the vagina, inserting as high into the vagina as you comfortably can.

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Gently rotate the dilator in clockwise and anti-clockwise directions for two to three minutes, and then take it out.

Start with the smallest dilator and move onto the next size when you are comfortable with it. If you have any concerns about moving on to the next size, please contact your clinical nurse specialist. Try to use your dilators three times a week.

A vibrator will also provide the same effect as the vaginal dilators if you feel more comfortable using this method.

Lubricants

Included in your vaginal dilator pack is a lubricant called Optilube. Please read the information leaflet inside the pack to see the ingredients in the lubricating jelly.

If you would like to try alternative lubricants, there are a number of options available from most chemists, or on prescription from your GP (for example, Senselle®, YES® WB, YES® OB, and Pjur Med®). We do not recommend using KY Jelly® due to its thicker consistency.

Place lubricant on the end of the dilator and around the opening to the vagina to make it easier to insert the dilator.

When you run out of lubricant, your GP can arrange a repeat prescription for you.

What to expect after using your vaginal dilators

After using your dilators it's normal to have some light bleeding or 'spotting', so we recommend using a panty liner.

Please contact your clinical nurse specialist if you experience:

- any pain or discomfort
- bleeding that is heavier than you would expect or does not stop
- unpleasant smelling discharge

Looking after your dilators

Wash your vaginal dilators and handle in warm, soapy water after each use. Rinse well to ensure that all traces of soap are removed to avoid any irritation the next time you use them. Allow to dry before returning them to their protective carrying bag.

How long will I need to use vaginal dilators?

You will need to use your vaginal dilators for at least one year after your treatment has finished. You can discuss this in more detail with your clinician or clinical nurse specialist. You can stop using the dilators when you no longer feel discomfort during vaginal examinations or you have resumed comfortable sexual intercourse.

If you are going on a trip and you don't feel comfortable taking your vaginal dilator pack with you, it's fine to have a break of a couple of weeks.

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Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about using your vaginal dilators, please don't hesitate to ask. We are very happy to answer any questions you have and reassure you about using your dilators. Please contact the gynae clinical nurse specialist team or the colorectal clinical nurse specialists:

Gynae clinical nurse specialist team
Telephone: **023 8120 8765**
Email: gynaenoncologysupport@uhs.nhs.uk

Colorectal clinical nurse specialists
Telephone: **023 8120 3789**
Email: lowerginurses@uhs.nhs.uk

Useful links

Macmillan Cancer Support - 'Anal cancer. Side Effects and Symptoms':
www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/anal-cancer/coping/side-effects-and-symptoms/late-effects-pelvic-radiotherapy

Macmillan Cancer Support – 'Advice to help you cope after treatment for cervical cancer':
www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/cervical-cancer/coping

Macmillan Cancer Support – 'Advice to help you cope after treatment for womb (endometrial) cancer': www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/womb-endometrial-cancer/coping

Macmillan Cancer Support – 'Vaginal cancer': www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/vagina-cancer

Macmillan Cancer Support – 'Vulva cancer': www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/vulva-cancer/coping

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