

A guide to dilation for women having pelvic radiotherapy

If you have pelvic radiotherapy you may notice a narrowing and shortening of your vagina and a reduction in its elasticity. If ignored, this can lead to:

- vaginal adhesions (where the vaginal walls stick tightly together). Breaking these adhesions can be very painful and, in extreme cases, you may need surgery. In severe cases, fistulas (a hole in the vaginal wall) can occur.
- pain during sex
- difficulty when having internal examinations in the future, during follow-up or a smear test

The following advice about vaginal dilation can prevent or reduce the risk of this happening, helping you to keep your vagina healthy.

What is vaginal dilation?

Vaginal dilation simply means stretching and opening the vagina.

The vagina needs to be dilated three times a week for a minimum of five minutes at a time. This can be done using a dilator (the recommended approach) or a vibrator or both.

What are vaginal dilators?

Vaginal dilators are smooth plastic tampon-shaped tubes, with a rounded end and an attachable handle. They are available in four graduating sizes. This allows you to progressively increase the size of your dilator to comfortably stretch the walls of your vagina. You will be provided with a lubricant such as Sylk, Aquagel or KY Jelly. You can talk to the radiotherapy nurse about the use of a dilator and you can buy one in the radiotherapy department.

The regular use of dilators can help to prevent shortening, narrowing or reduction of the elasticity of the vagina and maintain the vagina's ability to stretch. This will allow a more comfortable and effective physical examination at regular follow-ups as well as more comfortable intercourse.

How should I use the dilator?

1. First wash your hands. Use warm soapy water to wash all the different parts of the dilator, rinse well and then dry.
2. Find a private, comfortable place, for example your bedroom or bathroom. It's important to be relaxed so make sure the room is warm and maybe have some relaxing music playing.
3. Beginning with the smallest sized dilator and fit the universal handle to it.
4. Place a small quantity of water soluble lubricant on the rounded end of the dilator and around the entrance to your vagina.

5. Lie down on your back with your knees bent and slightly apart. Or stand with one leg raised on the side of the bed or bath. You will then be able to use the dilator as you would insert a tampon.
6. Insert the dilator into your vagina, as gently and as deeply as is comfortable without experiencing pain or discomfort.
7. Don't force the dilator. At first you may not be able to insert it fully, but this will get easier with practice and as the vaginal muscles relax.
8. Gently move the dilator in and out, forward and back, then from left to right inside the vagina.
9. Repeat these movements for five minutes. If you are able to do this easily, then next time try to use a slightly bigger dilator. You can continue to progress up the sizes when you feel comfortable. Use three to four times a week. Ideally within a period of a month you should be using the largest sized dilator.
10. After use, wash the dilator with soapy water, rinse well and dry.

If you experience any pain or bleeding when using the dilator, stop using it and tell your consultant or radiotherapy nurse.

How long do I need to continue using the dilator after my treatment is finished?

We recommend that you continue to use your dilator after treatment is finished for an indefinite length of time. This is to prevent any changes to your vagina, as these can continue after your treatment has finished. If any changes do happen to your vagina, it can be difficult to reverse them. You can talk to your gynaecologist about how long you should continue using the dilator.

You should examine the dilators regularly to ensure they are smooth. If there are any cracks or rough edges, don't use them and arrange for a replacement.

General information

You can not transmit cancer to your partner during sex, and no radiation remains in your body once the treatment session is completed.

If you have any concerns regarding any of this advice, speak to the radiotherapy nurse or your consultant.

Support Services

Radiotherapy treatment at Bupa Cromwell Hospital also includes eight counselling sessions. These are available for all patients and relatives.

You will see your consultant regularly through the course of treatment.

Contact

If you have any concerns please do not hesitate to contact us:

Radiotherapy reception 020 7460 5626/7
Hospital switchboard 020 7460 2000

If the radiotherapy department is unavailable, please contact the oncology ward on 0207 460 5992.

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