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# Use of vaginal dilators when receiving radiotherapy to the pelvis

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Radiotherapy

# Contents

The effects of radiotherapy treatment .....	1
What is a vaginal dilator? .....	1
When do I need to use the dilator? .....	1
How do I use the dilator? .....	2
Sexual intercourse after radiotherapy treatment .....	3
Sexuality and Cancer - who can help? .....	3
Vaginal dryness .....	4
Is bleeding or spotting normal? .....	4
Is it normal to experience pain? .....	4
Useful contact numbers .....	5
Useful organisations.....	5

This leaflet is designed to give you information about the use of vaginal dilators following radiotherapy to the pelvis.



## The effects of radiotherapy treatment

One of the side-effects of radiotherapy to the pelvis is changes to the vaginal tissue, which lead(s) to narrowing and shortening of the vagina. The vagina may become less elastic, drier and tender, sometimes making sexual intercourse and pelvic examination difficult and painful. Using a dilator regularly will keep the vagina open and more supple. Water-based lubricating gel can be used to help with the dryness and can be used with the dilator or when having sexual intercourse.

## What is a vaginal dilator?

The vaginal dilator is a smooth plastic tube which comes in a set of four different sizes and should be used as instructed to prevent the shortening and narrowing of your vagina. If you do not use the dilator, the vagina could shorten and become narrower and the upper part can close. It is important to keep your vagina open, to reduce the risk of discomfort on examinations when you come for your check up, or when you start sexual intercourse again as well as for your general well-being and comfort.

You should be offered a vaginal dilator during your radiotherapy treatment. If you are not, you **MUST** ask the radiographers or your oncologist who will arrange this for you.

## When do I need to use the dilator?

You should start using your dilator 2-8 weeks after radiotherapy to allow your radiotherapy reaction, e.g. soreness to settle. However, it is important that you start using your vaginal dilator as soon as you feel able to do so.

## How do I use the dilator?

Ensure that you examine the dilator prior to each use to be sure that it is smooth. If there are cracks or rough edges, do not use and contact your nurse specialist as soon as possible so a replacement can be issued.

Starting with the two smallest dilators, join them together and apply some gel to the end of the dilator or the entrance to the vagina. There are several different positions you may want to try until you select the most comfortable. A couple of examples are to lie on your back in bed with your knees bent and slightly apart, or to stand with one leg raised on a chair. (You may find it easier in the bath or shower, when you are more relaxed).

Gently insert the rounded end of the dilator into your vagina as deeply as you can, without causing discomfort. Move the dilator in a circular motion, clockwise and anti-clockwise in order to move the walls of your vagina. Continue this for 5 minutes. As you are slowly removing the dilator, continue to move in a circular motion.

If you are able to do this easily, then next time try using the next sized dilator. Ideally, within the period of a month, you should be using the largest sized dilator that you can use without experiencing pain and discomfort.

Guidelines suggest that the dilators should be used 2-3 times per week. Intercourse alone should not be relied upon to prevent vaginal narrowing and it is important to continue using the dilators as instructed for an indefinite period of time, given that some ladies develop vaginal narrowing up to 3 years after treatment finishes.



The vaginal dilator should be washed in hot soapy water, rinsed and dried. It should be stored in a clean and safe place in order to prevent damage.

## Sexual intercourse after radiotherapy treatment

You can have sexual intercourse as long as you are not having problems with bleeding, infection (discharge) or pain. However, you may find that it becomes uncomfortable as your treatment progresses and your vaginal tissues may become drier and your skin sore. If you stopped having sexual intercourse during your radiotherapy treatment, you can resume when you feel comfortable. If you do experience any burning or discomfort during sexual intercourse, it may be advisable to ask your partner to use a condom. If you have any questions about this, ask your doctor or specialist nurse. Those ladies who are pre-menopausal should still be using contraception, e.g. condom, as discussed with your doctor or nurse.

## Sexuality and Cancer - who can help?

You may find it helpful to talk to your partner about the changes you have experienced and how your body responds sexually. You can talk to a sexual therapist or counsellor in detail about the effects of these changes on you and your partner or difficulties you are experiencing. They can be contacted through:

- Your cancer treatment team (doctor or specialist nurse)
- Your general practitioner
- Directly through the websites and sources of help [www.basrt.org.uk](http://www.basrt.org.uk) or [www.cancerbackup.org.uk](http://www.cancerbackup.org.uk)

## Vaginal dryness

There are several creams and gels available which can help with dryness. These are available either on prescription or over the counter in pharmacies. Some examples of these are:

- Replens
- Hormonal creams
- Water-based lubricating jelly, e.g. K-Y Jelly
- SYLK, a natural, water-based lubricant (available on prescription or mail order [www.sylk.co.uk](http://www.sylk.co.uk) or SYLK Ltd, Freepost, PO Box 340, Rickmansworth, Hertfordshire, WD3 5WD. Tel 0870 9506004)

## Is bleeding or spotting normal?

Some spotting or discharge is natural for a few days following your treatment. This is normal. If this persists or becomes excessive or smelly, please contact your doctor. It is advisable to stop sexual intercourse or using a dilator until this problem settles.

## Is it normal to experience pain?

It is normal to experience some pain when first using the vaginal dilator, although this pain should reduce as your anxiety level lessens. Ensure that you use plenty of lubricating gel when using the vaginal dilator. If you have just gone up a size in dilator, go back down a size and assess whether the pain settles. However, if you are unable to use any of the dilators or to have sexual intercourse because of pain, please discuss this with your doctor or specialist nurse.



## Useful contact numbers

If you experience any difficulties relating to the use of dilator, resuming sexual intercourse or other emotional or physical problems relating to your treatment or disease, the following contact numbers are available for advice and information.

### **Nurse specialists direct line**

**Gynaecology** - 0151 556 5134

**Colorectal** - 0151 556 5764

All the above numbers have voicemail available to leave a message. You will have a contact telephone number for your local nurse specialist who will also be able to advise you on any problems or difficulties.

## Useful organisations

### **Macmillan Cancer Support**

Tel: 0808 808 00 00

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

## How we produce our information

All of our leaflets are produced by staff at The Clatterbridge Cancer Centre and this information is not sponsored or influenced in any way. Every effort is made to ensure that the information included in this leaflet is accurate and complete and we hope that it will add to any professional advice you have had. All our leaflets are evidence based where appropriate and they are regularly reviewed and updated. If you are concerned about your health in any way, you should consult your healthcare team.

We rely on a number of sources to gather evidence for our information. All of our information is in line with accepted national or international guidelines where possible. Where no guidelines exist, we rely on other reliable sources such as systematic reviews, published clinical trials data or a consensus review of experts. We also use medical textbooks, journals and government publications.

References for this leaflet can be obtained by telephoning 0151 556 5570.

If you need this leaflet in large print, Braille, audio or different language, please call 0151 556 5570.

**If you have a comment, concern, compliment or complaint, please call 0151 556 5203.**

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