

Vaginal dilation therapy

Oncology services Post-treatment patient information

Introduction

You recently received some radiation treatment to your pelvis, which may cause a long-term side effect called vaginal stenosis.

Vaginal stenosis is where the walls of the vagina stick together and this can shorten the vaginal canal.

Vaginal examinations are an important part of the follow-up process so we can check the cancer has not returned in that area, and stenosis can make this more difficult. It can also make sexual activity more difficult, or more likely to be difficult in the future.

It can occur within two to three months following treatment and if it occurs, it will continue to develop for approximately two years following your radiation treatment.

This leaflet is intended to advise you on how to reduce vaginal stenosis by carrying out regular vaginal dilation.

Vaginal dilation therapy

Vaginal dilation means gently stretching the vaginal tissue to keep the vagina open and encourage natural lubrication.

Vaginal dilation is recommended to:

- increase natural vaginal lubrication to keep the vagina supple and healthy
- allow a medical professional to accurately examine you and assess how you are responding to treatment as part of your ongoing medical follow-up
- ensure sexual relationships can continue or start after treatment

Vaginal dilators

These are smooth white plastic tubes designed for this purpose. A variety of sizes are provided along with a handle, a sample of lubricant, full instructions for use, and a carrying bag.

When to use:

We recommend starting to use the dilators two weeks after your radiation treatment, once you have recovered from the initial side-effects.

How to use:

- begin with the smallest size dilator
- attach the grey handle using a twist and lock action
- apply the lubricant around the tip of the dilator and a small amount at the vaginal opening

- ease the dilator gently into the vagina as deeply as is comfortable, applying slight pressure but not force, this should not be painful
- once the dilator is inside the vagina, gently move the dilator in a circular motion for five minutes
- as you remove the dilator, gently push it in and out, then from side to side, using your pelvic floor muscles to grip the dilator firmly
- when you feel comfortable using the smallest size, gradually move on to the next sizes in order
- after use, remove the handle and wash both the handle and the dilator in warm soapy water and dry before storing them away
- slight bleeding or blood staining when using the dilators is nothing to worry about
- if you experience fresh heavy bleeding or pain, seek advice from your GP or gynaecology nurse specialist

How often to use:

We recommend using the vaginal dilators two to three times a week for five to ten minutes at a time, for at least the length of the time that you will receive follow-up appointments. This is usually three to five years, or as recommended by your consultant. A repeat prescription for a lubricant can be obtained from your GP, or you can use another brand of water-based vaginal lubricant such as KY Jelly.

Alternative methods of dilation:

Other forms of vaginal dilation can be used if you prefer. These include:.

- vaginal massage, sometimes a good thing to start with to build up your confidence after the treatment
- regular vaginal sexual intercourse
- use of a comfortably sized vibrator

Further information:

We are aware that this topic is of a sensitive, personal, and intimate nature. However, you may find it helpful to talk through any issues. If you would like further support or advice, please do not hesitate to contact your gynaecology nurse specialist or brachytherapy radiographers..

Poole

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