

Radiotherapy department

Information about using a vaginal dilator

Introduction

After radiotherapy to the pelvis, you may experience some side effects to the vagina. These can include vaginal dryness, irritation and soreness. Sometimes scar tissue (fibrosis) can form, causing narrowing (atrophy) or shortening (stenosis) of the vaginal walls. These side effects are unlikely to cause any discomfort whilst undertaking your day-to-day living, however if sexually active or requiring a gynaecological examination they may result in some discomfort and difficulties.

We recommend vaginal dilation to help prevent or minimise these effects. This can be done by:

- Use of a dilator or vibrator
- Sexual intercourse
- A combination of intercourse and dilator use.

What is a vaginal dilator?

A vaginal dilator is a plastic cylinder specifically designed to be used inside the vagina to stretch it, reducing the chance of scar tissue forming.

Benefits of using a vaginal dilator

Whether you are sexually active or not, using dilators to maintain the form of the vaginal wall will:

- Reduce the risk of long-term discomfort that vaginal scarring can cause
- If required, allow internal examinations without discomfort
- Help to prevent sexual intercourse from being uncomfortable or reduce potential difficulties with future sexual partners, if you are not sexually active at present.



How do I use it?

We suggest you find a private and comfortable place where you can use the dilator. This could be in the bath or shower, as long as you do not use any perfumed products. You can use the dilator in whichever way you find most comfortable. You may wish to lie down on your back with your knees slightly apart or bent, or stand with one leg raised on the side of the bed or bath and use the dilator as you would insert a tampon.

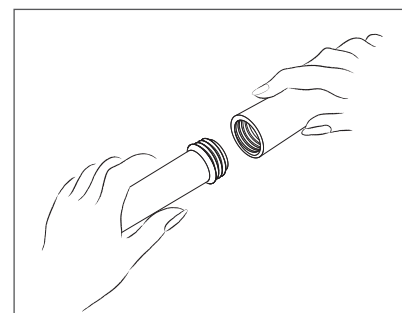
- Connect the smallest size of dilator (size 1) to the next one (size 2), always start with the smallest and work your way up.
- Place some lubricant on the part of the dilator that will be placed inside the vagina, and also around the entrance of the vagina. The dilator pack is supplied with some sachets of lubricant. When you require further lubricants, these can be bought over the counter or discussed with your GP as they may be available on prescription, e.g. 'Sylk' and 'Yes WB' (water-based).

Top tip: Water-based lubricants are the most popular because they are easily absorbed and easier to wash away. This does mean that the lubrication does not last as long and you may need to reapply. Using a water-based lubricant in the vagina and an oil-based lubricant on the dilator can help with comfort. However please be aware oil-based lubricants can damage latex condoms.

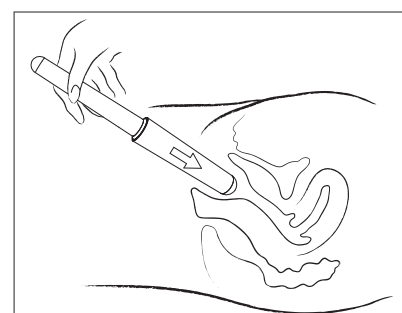
- Using firm gentle pressure; insert the dilator into the vagina as gently and deeply as is comfortable, you should be able to feel it gently bounce off the top of the vagina when it reaches the end. Try to relax your muscles and **do not force the dilator**.
- Once the dilator is inside the vagina, gently move it up and down, side to side. Use a circular motion as you move the dilator. Also gently stretch the vagina upwards by gently pushing it upwards and letting the dilator bounce off the top of the vagina, this helps to keep the elasticity of this area which is particularly important if you are going to have intercourse in the future.
- Repeat this several times for 3 - 5 minutes.
- After use, remove the dilator; wash it with soapy water, rinse well and dry. Store the dilator in the case it was provided in.

If you are able to do this easily, then try the next size up dilator the next time, and progress up the sizes. **You do not have to get up to the largest size (size 4)**. Some women find they experience discomfort after using the dilator for the first time. If you do we suggest you use a mild painkiller that you normally use, e.g. paracetamol.

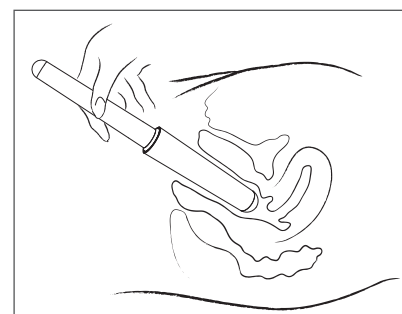
Afterwards, if you have spotting or slight bleeding do not be alarmed. If you have any heavy bleeding or pains when using the dilator then stop using it and contact your GP or clinical team.



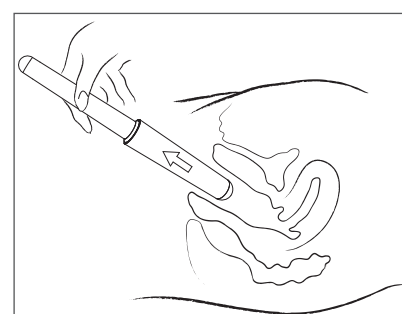
1. Connect size one (smallest) cone to the size 2 cone. Apply lubricating gel.



2. Get into a comfortable position, apply lubricating gel to the entrance of the vagina, and slowly insert dilator into the vagina as far as it will go.



3. Gently move the dilator from side to side, up and down and then circular movements for approximately 5 minutes to gently open and stretch the vagina.



4. Remove the dilator, wash with soap and water and dry.

When do I start using dilators?

We recommend 5 - 6 weeks after treatment finishes, or when your side effects have settled down. If you still feel sore and uncomfortable then leave it longer.

How long should I use the dilator?

Use 2 - 3 times a week. After 6 months if you are having no problems and are able to use the dilators with ease, then reduce to using them just once a week for the next 2 - 3 years. After 6 months, if you are having intercourse once a week or more then you can stop using the dilators.

Vaginal dryness

If you experience vaginal dryness, we recommend using a vaginal moisturiser. Vaginal dryness can also cause itchiness or discomfort in the area. If you moisturise the external skin, this will help the internal dryness. If you are experiencing vaginal itchiness, then you may want to try anti-histamines. There are various products available over the counter and at the pharmacy. You may wish to discuss this with your GP as some products may be available on prescription.

If you have any questions or concerns then please contact your GP or key worker.

If you need information in a different format, such as easy read, large print, BSL, braille, email, SMS text or other communication support, please tell your ward or clinic nurse.

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