

Patient Information

Pelvic Radiotherapy for Female Patients



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

The effects of radiotherapy treatment

Radiotherapy treatment can produce side effects within the area being treated, these can include;

- Dryness and thinning of the vagina
- Shortening and narrowing of the vagina
- Fibrosis (the formation of scar tissue) in the vagina
- A reduction in the amount of natural vaginal lubricant

These side effects may make sexual intercourse and future examinations and check-ups difficult and uncomfortable.

To help you reduce these side effects, your vagina can be kept open by vaginal dilation. This can be achieved by;

- Sexual intercourse
- Using a vaginal dilator
- A combination of intercourse and dilator use

It is advised that if you do have sexual intercourse while on chemotherapy treatment you should use a barrier method of contraception e.g. condoms. Water-based lubricating gel can be used to help with the dryness and can be used with the dilator or during sexual intercourse.

What is a vaginal dilator?

A vaginal dilator is a smooth plastic tube with a rounded end and will come as a set consisting of four different sizes.



Using a dilator will reduce the chance of scar tissue forming and stretch the muscles within the vaginal walls. 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 during examinations when you come for your check up with the doctor.
- To ensure sexual intercourse is more comfortable
- For your general well-being and comfort.

Where do I get a dilator and the lubrication?

We will give you a pack of vaginal dilators when we discuss them with you in the radiotherapy review clinic. We will then send a letter to your GP asking them to prescribe water based lubricating gel to use alongside the dilators.

When do I need to use the dilator?

Start to use the dilator two weeks after finishing radiotherapy and continue twice a week for a minimum of 12 months unless otherwise advised by your doctor at a follow up appointment.

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 GP so a replacement can be issued.

1. Start with the smallest dilator and apply some lubricant 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).
2. Gently insert the rounded end of the dilator into your vagina as far as you can without causing discomfort. Once inserted the dilator should be slowly withdrawn and inserted, moved gently from side to side, and carefully rotated. Continue this for 5 minutes
3. 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.
4. After use, wash the dilator with hot soapy water, rinse and dry thoroughly.

You can continue to have sexual intercourse if you would like to. You may notice that your vagina is drier than normal and you may need to use a lubricant. Intercourse alone should not be relied upon to prevent vaginal narrowing and it is important to continue using the dilators as instructed by the hospital staff.

Vaginal bleeding / discharge

Some slight spotting of blood or discharge may be noticed when first using the dilator. If the bleeding is heavy or persistent, or if the discharge is excessive or smells stop using the dilator and contact your doctor or nurse specialist.

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 started to use a larger dilator then choose a smaller one 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.

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. If you have not yet gone through the menopause you should still be using contraception, e.g. condom, as discussed with your doctor or nurse.

Your feelings

As well as the physical side effects mentioned, the radiotherapy treatment to the pelvic area may affect the way you feel about yourself and your body.

If you would like to talk to someone regarding concerns you may have about the effects treatment is having on your emotional state, your relationship and your sexual life, you can contact the Hamar Centre where professionals who specialise in these areas of concern are available to you (see contacts).

We are a Dementia Friendly Department , please contact us directly on our answerphone 01743 261179 if you require additional help



Useful contacts



Our Vision To provide excellent care
for the communities we serve



- Gynae Nurse Specialists - 01743 261000 ext. 1076
- Colorectal Nurse Specialist - 01743 261000 ext. 1144
- Therapeutic Radiographers - 01743 261179

For more information please contact;

- Royal Shrewsbury Hospital; 0800 783 0057 or 01743 2616 91
- Princess Royal Hospital; 01952 282888
- Hamar Help and Support Centre – counselling and supportive therapies.
- Psychosexual Therapist - 01743 261035

Other useful information

- Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital Website
www.sath.nhs.uk/cancer
- Macmillan Cancer Support – improves the lives of people affected by cancer. They provide practical, medical, emotional and financial support and push for better cancer care.
Tel 0845 6016161
www.macmillan.org.uk
- NHS website is for patients with questions about diagnosis and treatment of common conditions
www.nhs.uk
- Patient UK provides leaflets on health and disease translated into 11 other languages as well as links to national support and self-help groups and a directory of UK health websites.
www.patient.co.uk