

Radiotherapy

Vaginal dilator therapy after radiotherapy treatment

Information for patients, relatives and carers

This leaflet will tell you more about vaginal dilator therapy after radiotherapy, how it can help you and how to use vaginal dilators. You can talk more with your oncology team about this during one of your appointments.

What is vaginal dilator therapy?

Vaginal dilator therapy is a way to aid your recovery from pelvic radiotherapy. It involves gently stretching your vagina using vaginal dilators. These are specially designed plastic tubes, which are used to keep your vagina supple and help prevent scar tissue forming.

It is normal to feel unsure about using vaginal dilators. We are here to support you in feeling safe and comfortable with dilator therapy, and you can always discuss any questions or concerns you may have with your specialist nurse or the radiotherapy review team.

Why might I need to have vaginal dilator therapy?

You might have pain during sex (dyspareunia) or narrowing of the vagina (stenosis) after vaginal surgery and radiotherapy.

How can dilator therapy help me?

As a result of your recent radiotherapy treatment, your vagina may have narrowed and shortened due to scar tissue forming.

Regular and correct use of vaginal dilators can help to stretch and widen your vagina. This will help prevent it from narrowing or closing up after your radiotherapy treatment. This will also help reduce any long-term discomfort from follow-up examinations, further treatments and sexual intercourse.

Whether you are regularly having penetrative sex or not, using dilators will:

- make you aware of the changes to your anatomy
- make sure you can still have penetrative sex after treatment
- reduce discomfort or painful sex
- reduce potential long-term discomfort that vaginal scarring can cause

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- reduce discomfort during examinations

Are there any alternatives to this treatment?

Regular vaginal intercourse can be a substitute for vaginal dilators. You may also feel more comfortable using commercially available sex toys of appropriate diameter and length as an alternative to the plastic dilators you have been provided with. Short and regular sessions will give better results than intensive sessions with long gaps between.

You can always speak to your specialist nurse or the radiotherapy review team – they can help you find an approach that feels comfortable, safe and respectful to you.

When do I start using the dilators?

You should start using your dilators 2 weeks after you finish radiotherapy. During the final week of your radiotherapy treatment, we will give you an appointment to see the treatment review nurse / radiographer who will explain in detail how to use the dilators and when to start using them. They can also answer any questions you have.

Using your dilator

- It is okay to feel unsure about starting dilator therapy – many people are. You may want to try holding and handling the dilators before you start, so that you are used to how they feel.
- Plan when you are going to use your dilators and find a private and comfortable place.
- Pace yourself and allow yourself time to gently explore what feels right for you.
- You can use the dilator in various positions. You can lie down on your back with your knees slightly apart and bent. You can also stand with one leg raised on the side of the bed or the bath and use the dilator as you would if you were inserting a tampon.
- You can also use the dilator while in the bath or shower.
- Your dilators come in sizes 1 (smallest), 2, 3, and 4 (largest). We suggest that you start using the smallest size, size 1.
- Your dilators are designed to screw together to form a handle. This makes them easier and more comfortable to use.
- Cover the tip and sides of the dilator with a large amount of water-based lubricant.
- Start by inserting the dilator into your vagina as gently and as deeply as is comfortable for you. Do 5 to 10 circular movements, partly pull the dilator out and repeat the 5 circular movements. Then pull it out towards the opening of the vagina and repeat 5 circular movements. You may feel a gentle stretch as you do these movements – this will get easier as your vaginal muscles relax.
- It is important to take your time and set a pace that you find best for you.

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- After you have used it, remove the dilator, wash it with soapy water, rinse well and dry it with a clean towel.
 - You should use the size 1 dilator for 7 days. On day 8, you may want to try using the size 2 dilator. If size 2 is uncomfortable and causes pain, go back to using size 1 for another 7 days. After this, if you feel ready, try to use size 2 again.
 - If it is too painful or uncomfortable to use the larger size, use size 1 daily until your next review with your oncologist.
 - If you are comfortable and want to try a larger size, you can try the next size up after 7 days.
 - It is normal to feel some mild pain or discomfort during or after using the dilator, and you can take your usual pain relief (like paracetamol or ibuprofen) if you wish.
 - If you find it very painful or uncomfortable to use your dilators, you should contact your specialist nurse or the radiotherapy review team. They are there to support and advise you.

How long will I have to use the dilator?

This varies from person to person but the effects of radiotherapy on the vagina can continue for many months after treatment. Initially, we advise you to use the dilators for five minutes each day for about 6 weeks.

After this period, you should continue to use the dilators 2 to 3 times every week.

At your follow-up appointment, your consultant will examine you and will talk to you about how long you should carry on using the dilators for. This timeline is different for everyone and depends on you and how your body feels. You and your oncologist will discuss about what is best for you – the important thing is your comfort and wellbeing.

Is there anything I need to watch out for at home?

You might have a small amount of bleeding or 'spotting'. This is normal and nothing to be worried about. It is caused by the breakdown of scar tissue.

However, if the bleeding is fresh and heavy, and you can see blood clots, please ring your specialist nurse via the navigator service on 020 3313 0303.

Who do I contact for more help or information?

If you have any questions or concerns about vaginal dilator therapy, please ring the treatment review team at Charing Cross Hospital, Monday to Friday, 9:00 to 17:00 (except bank holidays) on 020 3311 1737.

For any medical emergencies, and outside of these hours, please go to your local A&E department.

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3313 0088** (Charing Cross, Hammersmith and Queen Charlotte's & Chelsea hospitals), or **020 3312 7777** (St Mary's and Western Eye hospitals). You can also email PALS at **imperial.pals@nhs.net**. The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street
London W2 1NY

Email: **ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net**

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team:
imperial.communications@nhs.net

Wi-fi

We have a free wi-fi service for basic filtered browsing and a premium wi-fi service (requiring payment) at each of our five hospitals. Look for WiFiSPARK_FREE or WiFiSPARK_PREMIUM

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