

After Pelvic Radiotherapy for women



Providing support for patients and their families at the
Royal Sussex County Hospital and the Princess Royal Hospital

Vaginal Dilators after pelvic radiotherapy

Radiotherapy can cause changes to the tissue in your vagina so to keep this area comfortable and functioning normally we recommend using vaginal dilators.

This leaflet explains how dilators can reduce the long term effects this treatment can have on the vagina. If you have any concerns please feel free to contact your specialist nurse.

Benefits of a vaginal dilator

A vaginal dilator is a plastic cylinder specially shaped to be used inside the vagina. Whether you are sexually active or not, using dilators to maintain the form of the vaginal wall will:

- Reduce potential long-term discomfort that vaginal scarring can cause
- Allow the medical team to examine you internally, if required, without causing discomfort
- Help to prevent intercourse from being uncomfortable or reduce potential difficulties with future sexual partners, if you are not in a sexually active relationship at the present time.

Using your dilator

We recommend that you start using the dilator about two to four weeks after your last treatment. If you still feel sore and uncomfortable then leave it longer; sometimes this could be up to eight weeks.

Sexual intercourse and use of vibrators will also help with vaginal dilation, so you can use either the dilators, a vibrator or have sexual intercourse to keep your vaginal tissue healthy. It may not be necessary to use a dilator if vaginal intercourse (if desired) is restarted at least once a week.

Find a private and comfortable place where you can relax and use the dilator. Dilators can be used in the shower, bathroom or bedroom if this provides privacy, as this can help you to relax and therefore use the dilator more successfully. If applicable, your partner may also wish to be involved.

- A water-soluble lubricant should be placed on the dilator and around the entrance to your vagina prior to insertion. Repeat prescriptions for the lubricant can be requested via your GP free of charge. Please let your specialist nurse know if you do not have a prescription exemption card.
- There are various positions in which to use the dilator: Either lie down on your back with knees slightly apart and bent, or stand with a leg raised on the side of the bed or bath to insert the dilator as you would a tampon.
- Gently insert the lubricated dilator into your vagina (without forcing it) as far as is comfortable. Try to relax your muscles and do not force the dilator.
- Once inserted to the top of the vagina or as far as is comfortable, gently rotate the dilator and then withdraw it. You may find it helpful to visualise the tip of the dilator as a piece of chalk drawing small circles, which gradually increase in size.
- It is usual to start with the smallest size, or a finger and progress to the larger (size three or four in the days/weeks following treatment, or as it is comfortable).
- You may choose how long you use the dilator for each time. Guidelines suggest from 'three to ten minutes twice a week', for the first six months.
- After the first six months use once a week, and then occasionally after a year if you are not experiencing difficulty.
- A small amount of bleeding or 'spotting' is not uncommon when using dilators.
- If you experience heavy vaginal bleeding, or pain, and then please seek advice from your GP, Practice Nurse, or Clinical Nurse Specialist.
- Douching is not usually advised.

Maintenance of your dilator

Wash your dilator with soap and water after each use and allow to dry before storage. Please check the dilator for any cracks or damage before each use and do not use if damaged, but contact your specialist nurse for a replacement.

Where else can I get help or information?

Royal Sussex County **01273 696955 (RSCH)**

Princess Royal Hospital **01444 441881 (PRH)**

Macmillan Support Worker: **01273 696955 Ext. 67658**

Macmillan Colorectal Specialist Nurses:

01273 696955 Ext. 64349/67428 or **01444 441881 Ext. 5694**

Specialist Review Radiographers: **01273 696955 Ext: 7286**

Follow Up Coordinator: **01273 696955 Ext. 67476**

Macmillan Horizon Centre: horizoncentre@macmillan.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Support

Helpline: **0808 808 00 00** www.macmillan.org.uk

Beating Bowel Cancer

Helpline: **020 8973 0011** www.beatingbowelcancer.org

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk

Information Prescription: www.nhs.uk/ipg/Pages/IPStart.aspx

Psychological Support Service

Laura Pritchard, Macmillan Lead for Psychological Therapies 01273 664694

Pelvic Radiation Disease Association 01372 744338 www.prda.org.uk/

Please report any of these symptoms to your GP, CNS or Specialist Doctor, as they may be related to late side effects of radiotherapy

- Often needing to have a 'poo' at night
- Needing to rush to the loo or not making it in time (to open bowels)
- Bleeding from vagina (apart from occasional spotting when using the dilator) or bleeding from your bottom
- Other gastro-intestinal symptoms which interfere with your normal life.

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Disclaimer

The information in this leaflet is for guidance purposes only and is in no way intended to replace professional clinical advice by a qualified practitioner.

Ref number: 758

Publication Date: July 2016

Review Date: July 2018

