

# Vaginal changes after radiation therapy to the pelvis

For women, radiation therapy to the pelvis can cause inflammation and scar tissue in the vagina. If this happens, vaginal sex and medical examinations may be painful or difficult and, in some cases, impossible.

## What changes may happen?

The vagina is a canal that leads to your cervix and uterus. Radiation therapy to the pelvis can cause your vaginal canal to become dry and sore. It may become shorter, less stretchy and narrower. This is called *vaginal stenosis*. These changes can start during treatment and may slowly get worse weeks, months or years after treatment.

To limit these changes, it is important to keep the vagina open and supple. This will help vaginal examinations to be less painful during future appointments with your doctor. If you are sexually active, it will help make vaginal sex more comfortable.

## How can I manage these changes?

There are things you can do after your treatment to help keep the vagina open, soft and flexible.

These include:

- using dilators, fingers, vibrators or other devices
- having regular vaginal sex (if you are sexually active).

These activities may be uncomfortable, but shouldn't cause pain.

## What is a dilator?

- A vaginal dilator is a smooth plastic tube with a round end.
- It helps prevent scar tissue from forming in your vagina.
- Dilators come in different lengths and sizes.
- Your treatment team may provide you with dilators to use, or you can buy them online.

## When should I start using a dilator?

The best time to start using a dilator can vary.

It is best to finish your radiation therapy treatment and allow some time to heal before you start using a dilator.

Ask your treatment team when to start using a dilator.

## How often should I use a dilator?

You can use a dilator daily for 10-30 minutes. You may be told to use a dilator more or less often.

Ask your treatment team how often you should use the dilator.

## When should I stop using a dilator?

It can be helpful to continue using a dilator for months to years after you finish treatment. Your treatment team will talk to you about how long you should continue to use a dilator.

## What if I don't feel comfortable using a dilator?

It is common to feel uncomfortable or nervous about using dilators.

Getting started can feel like the most difficult step. To help you to feel more comfortable, talk to

- your treatment team
- a counsellor, psychologist or sex therapist
- a physiotherapist that specialises in women's health or pelvic physiotherapy.

Your treatment team can refer you to the right person.

## What if I am still having sex?

- Vaginal sex will help to stretch the vagina.
- If you are having sex regularly using a dilator may not be necessary.

## Common questions

### Does it hurt to use a dilator?

- You may feel some slight pain or discomfort. It shouldn't be very painful.
- If using the dilator is painful, try using:
  - the smallest sized dilator when you first start
  - more water-based lubricant. Do not use oil-based lubricants (such as petroleum-based products, Vaseline®, and baby oil) as they can cause vaginal irritation
  - the dilator more often.
- Pelvic floor muscles are the muscles in your pelvis and around your vagina. Tense pelvic floor muscles can also make it uncomfortable to use a dilator. To help relax and soften your pelvic floor muscles when using the dilator:
  - take your time and don't rush
  - take slow, deep breaths
  - try using the dilator in the bath or shower.

### What happens if I bleed?

A small amount of bleeding or 'spotting' after using a dilator is normal. If there is a lot of bleeding or pain after using the dilator, talk to your treatment team.

### I have vaginal dryness, what can I use?

Non-hormonal vaginal moisturisers may be used to help with vaginal dryness. You can buy them at a pharmacy or online.

### What should I avoid?

Avoid things that can irritate the vagina, for example:

- douching (rinsing the inside of the vagina)
- some products such as soaps and shower gels
- oil-based lubricants.



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## How do I use a dilator?

- Start with the smallest dilator first and once this size is comfortable, you can move to the next largest size.
- Find a time and place that is private and comfortable to relax and use the dilator.
- Before each use, wash your hands and the dilator in warm soapy water and rinse well.
- Find a comfortable position, for example:
  - Lie down on your back on a bed, lounge or in a bath with your knees bent and slightly apart.
  - Stand with one leg bent, raised and supported by a chair, bed, bath, or toilet.
- Before inserting the dilator, place a water-based lubricant along the length of the dilator and around the entrance of your vagina.
- Hold the dilator in one hand and, with your other hand, spread the skin at the opening of your vagina. Gently insert the dilator.
  - Try to relax - some resistance from your pelvic floor muscles is normal.
- Once inserted as far as comfortable, try slowly and steadily moving the dilator backward and forward, then left to right and then rotating or turning the dilator.
- Continue this for at least 5-10 minutes.
- When finished, gently rotate the dilator as you remove it.
- After each use, wash the dilator in warm soapy water, rinse and dry.
- Store the dilator in a dry place in a closed container where it won't be scratched or damaged.

## Examples of different sized dilators

