

# Advice for women following radiotherapy to the pelvis

Patient Information Series PI 30

## Contacts

Brachytherapy ..... 020 3826 2629

Clinic radiographer ..... 07825 024058 or  
020 3826 2612 (voice mail - please leave a message)

Radiotherapy clinic nurses ..... 020 3826 2192 or  
..... 020 3826 2186

Gynaecology nurse specialist ..... 020 3826 2091 or  
07917 078214

Colorectal nurse specialist ..... 020 3826 2115

Mount Vernon Hospital switchboard ..... 020 3826 2020

Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre ..... 020 3826 2555

**For urgent medical advice**  
**24 hour Acute Oncology Service**  
**Mount Vernon Cancer Centre: 07825 028855**



**NHS**  
East and North Hertfordshire  
NHS Trust



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### Introduction

This leaflet contains information and advice about caring for yourself now that your pelvic radiotherapy has finished.

The most likely side effect that may occur after having pelvic radiotherapy is vaginal narrowing (stenosis). This occurs when the vaginal tissues get shorter and narrower due to the formation of scar tissue. This is more likely to occur in patients who have had both external beam radiotherapy and brachytherapy.

Regular vaginal dilation especially during the first one to two years after radiotherapy may help to reduce narrowing and ease future vaginal examinations.

If you are sexually active, dilation may not be necessary if you have intercourse on a regular basis. Please check with your oncologist or specialist nurse.

### What should I do if I am not sexually active?

Some women who are not sexually active may find future vaginal examinations uncomfortable. Vaginal narrowing can sometimes make it more difficult to monitor you during your follow up care. We recommend that women who are not sexually active use vaginal dilators following radiotherapy.

Using a dilator may make future examinations more comfortable and helps your doctor to be able to fully examine you at your follow-up appointments.

## How do I use the dilators?

It is recommended you start to use your dilators two to eight weeks after you finish your radiotherapy. This allows time for your side effects to settle. If your skin has broken down in the vaginal or perineal area, wait until your skin has healed before using a dilator.

Before using your dilators for the first time, wash them in warm soapy water, rinse well with running water and dry them properly.

You may find it comfortable to lie on your back with your knees bent and legs slightly apart:

1. Attach the two smallest dilators together in the middle, and then the largest two dilators together.
2. Apply some water-based lubricant around the tip of the dilator and to your vaginal opening.
3. Starting with the smallest dilator, gently insert it into your vagina as far as is comfortable.
4. Once the dilator is comfortable inside your vagina, gently move it in a circular motion for one to two minutes.
5. As you remove the dilator, gently push it in and out slowly and move it from side to side.
6. In the same session, progress to using whatever size dilator is comfortable repeating the above steps.
7. We recommend you repeat this sequence once daily for six weeks. If you find it difficult to do every day, aim to use the dilators at least three times a week.
8. After six weeks aim to use the dilators two to three times a week for six months to two years. If you are having regular sexual intercourse, dilation may not be necessary. Please check with your oncologist or specialist nurse.

At your follow up appointment please discuss with your doctor how long you will need to continue dilation. This will depend on whether you are sexually active or not and if you are experiencing any pain or discomfort during vaginal examinations at one to two years after finishing your radiotherapy.

After use, the vaginal dilators should be washed in warm soapy water, rinsed well and dried properly inside and out before putting them in the box for storage.

After dilation you may have a small amount of bleeding or light spotting. This is normal but if you experience anything heavier please inform your oncologist or health care team.

## What can I do to prepare for my follow up vaginal examination?

If you are concerned, you may want to use your dilators more frequently in the weeks before your appointment. This will make it easier and as comfortable as possible for your vaginal examination. The examination is an important part of your follow up appointment.

You should also be given a leaflet on pelvic floor muscle exercises. Please ask if you have not been given one. You are advised to continue doing these regularly.

Please call if you are worried about anything (see contact numbers on page 2).

## What should I do if I am sexually active?

For some women the thought of resuming sexual intercourse might be worrying. The following advice may be helpful:

- After radiotherapy and before involving your partner, you may find it useful to look and touch yourself and become familiar with your body again. Some women may also choose to use dilators to help them feel both comfortable and confident in having sexual intercourse.
- You may have a reaction from the radiotherapy that affects the tissues in the vagina and the skin in the treatment area. This may result in some discomfort during vaginal intercourse and may cause a little bleeding, which should settle. If this happens to you please discuss it with your doctor or health care team.
- You can keep the vagina moist by increasing the amount of foreplay or by using a lubricating jelly. You can buy lubricating jelly over the counter at a chemist, in supermarkets and on-line.
- Find different techniques to ensure control and comfort during vaginal intercourse.
- Remember there are other ways you can express love and be intimate.

Often women feel tired or depressed as a result of their diagnosis and treatment and it is common to lose all interest in sex. Talking with your partner helps to overcome any misunderstandings. Women who have undergone treatment to an intimate part of their body say that they experienced a range of emotions both expected and unexpected.

A booklet you may find helpful is 'Sexuality & Cancer for Women', by Macmillan Cancer support. This booklet is available at the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (LJMC) or online at [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

If you are worried please discuss your concerns with your health care team or the healthcare professionals at the LJMC.

## How do I look after my skin after my radiotherapy has finished?

Skin care after treatment should be continued for two to six weeks depending on your skin reaction. You should bath or shower using your normal products. The skin in the treated area should be patted dry gently with a soft towel.

Continue to use any creams or special dressings you may have been given, until your skin reaction has settled and the skin in the treated area feels comfortable.

## What other effects will I experience after my radiotherapy has finished?

### Urinary and bowel

Any urinary or bowel side effects you have may continue for two to three weeks (sometimes longer, up to six to eight weeks) after you have finished your radiotherapy. Until the symptoms settle, continue with the advice given while you were having treatment.

### Infertility

Pelvic radiotherapy can cause infertility and an early menopause. If you have not already been through your menopause it is important you discuss fertility, menopausal symptoms and choices about contraception with your health care team.

### Vaginal dryness

Some of the symptoms of pelvic radiotherapy are similar to those of the menopause, including vaginal dryness and loss of libido.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) such as topical oestrogens, and vaginal lubricants can help. i.e. Sylk (provides immediate relief from dryness), Vagisan (has a moisturising effect when applied daily) and Replens (one application can provide long lasting moisturising for up to three days). Please discuss this with your oncologist.

## **Other help and support**

For more information you can also refer to our Patient Information leaflet PI12 (Radiotherapy to abdomen and/or pelvis).

The Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (LJMC) offers information and support to patients and their families and is located next to Chemotherapy Suite by Gate 3. The staff at the LJMC work as part of the overall team caring for you.

People who have cancer often say that during their illness they experience a range of emotions. Many find it to be a stressful, anxious and confusing time. Please feel free to drop in before, during and after any of your visits to Mount Vernon Cancer Centre to find out more about the LJMC services that you may find helpful.

The volunteers and healthcare professionals at the LJMC provide help, support and information in a relaxed setting to help patients cope with cancer and its treatment.

LJMC services include a range of complementary therapies, counselling, relaxation sessions and financial advice. You can drop in without an appointment or call the LJMC helpline on 020 3826 2555. More information is on the back of this leaflet.

### **If you normally pay for NHS prescriptions**

People undergoing treatment for cancer do not have to pay NHS prescription charges if they have a valid medical exemption certificate. To get an exemption certificate, ask your GP for an application form.

## Identification

Please note that it is a legal requirement for the staff to check your name and details against your treatment records every time you attend.

This publication has been produced by the Information team at the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre. Contributors include professionals, patients and carers from Mount Vernon Cancer Centre who have expertise and experience in the topics covered by this publication. All our publications are reviewed and updated regularly. If you would like any details of the references used to write this information please contact the LJM on 020 3826 2555.

Lynda Jackson   
Macmillan Centre



## Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre

*... supporting people affected by cancer...*

- ① Drop-in centre for support and information
- ① Telephone helpline
- ① Complementary therapies\*
- ① Counselling\*
- ① Benefits advice\*
- ① Relaxation classes
- ① Look Good...Feel Better™ beauty workshops
- ① The Way Ahead headwear workshops
- ① Self-help courses

The **Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre** is situated between the Cancer Centre and Gate 3 (White Hill)

Please drop in or call to find out how we may be able to help you

Opening hours: **Monday–Friday: 9.30am–4.30pm**

Mount Vernon Cancer Centre, Northwood, Middlesex HA6 2RN

Telephone Helpline: **020 3826 2555**

Website: [www.ljmc.org](http://www.ljmc.org)

\* Service only available to NHS patients under the care of an oncologist based at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre



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PI 30 [pink] published 10/18  
review date 10/20