

a patient's guide

Using vaginal dilators after pelvic radiotherapy

Patient Information Series PI 30



Mount Vernon
Cancer Centre

Contacts

Brachytherapy	020 3826 2629
Gynaecology nurse specialist	020 3826 2580 or 07917 078214
Radiotherapy clinic radiographers:	020 3826 2612 / 2613 or 07825 024058
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**

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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.

Either your specialist nurse or radiographer will give you dilators and explain their use.

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?

The radiographers will advise you when to start using dilators. This is usually 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. Try to relax and take your time.
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. If the smallest dilator was easy and comfortable to use, in the same session you can progress to using whatever size dilator is comfortable, repeating the above steps.
7. We recommend you 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.

Most women find that the process of using dilators becomes easier as they become more confident in using them.

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, wash the vaginal dilators in warm soapy water, rinse well and dry them 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 stop using them and contact your specialist nurse or your oncologist.

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 non-perfumed lubricating jelly (see p8). You can buy lubricating jelly over the counter at a chemist, in supermarkets and online.
- 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 'Cancer and your sex life' by Macmillan Cancer Support. This booklet is available at the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (LJMC) or online at www.macmillan.org.uk.

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

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. Suitable products are available from your local pharmacy and include:

- Sylk: provides immediate relief from dryness
 - Vagisan: has a moisturising effect when applied daily
 - Replens and Vagisil: one application can provide long lasting moisturising for up to three days
 - YES products: this range includes moisturisers and lubricants
- Please discuss this with your oncologist.

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.

For more information, please ask for a copy of the Macmillan Cancer Support booklets:

- Managing the bladder late effects of pelvic radiotherapy
- Managing the bowel late effects of pelvic radiotherapy

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.

Skin care

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.

Other help and support

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.

If you have any questions or concerns about cancer and your treatment, are struggling to cope or need some support, please visit the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre (LJMC). Please feel free to drop in before, during or after any of your visits to the Cancer Centre.

The team at the LJMC works as part of the overall team caring for you to provide help, support and information in a relaxed setting to help you better cope with cancer and its treatment. Your family and friends are also welcome to visit the centre or call the Helpline.

A range of support services are available at the centre. These include complementary therapy, relaxation sessions, counselling and financial advice. Please ask for more details.

You do not need an appointment to visit the LJMC which is located next to the Chemotherapy Suite by Gate 3. If you are unable to get to the LJMC, you can call the Helpline on 020 3826 2555.

Please see the back page of this leaflet for more information.

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.

Mount Vernon Cancer Centre is committed to ensuring that patients receive the best quality of care regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Consent

It is a legal requirement to have a signed consent form from you before the start of your treatment.

If you have already been given one of these forms, please bring the completed form with you when you come for your first appointment.

If you have not been given a form, this will be discussed with you at your first appointment.

Identification

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

Pregnancy/fathering a child

Patients must not be pregnant or become pregnant, or father a child, during a course of treatment or for some months afterwards. **Please discuss this with your cancer specialist.**

If you are of child bearing capacity we ask that you inform a member of staff. It is our duty of care to enquire whether individuals may be pregnant or breastfeeding. This information will be kept in strict confidence.

If you think there is a chance, however small, of you or your partner being pregnant during treatment, it is extremely important that you discuss this with your oncologist, radiographer or nurse as soon as possible.

This publication has been produced by the Information team at Mount Vernon Cancer Centre. Contributors include health professionals, patients and carers 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 Information team on 020 3826 2555.

Questions or concerns about cancer and treatment? Struggling to cope? Need some support? Need to talk?

Drop in to the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre
or call the support & information helpline

We will listen to your concerns, answer your questions
and guide you to further information
and services to help you

cancer treatment	practical support
side effects of treatment	headwear workshops
day-to-day living with cancer	exercise
benefits advice	diet and nutrition
counselling	health and wellbeing
someone to talk to	talking to family and friends
emotional support	Look Good Feel Better
complementary therapy	self-help courses
relaxation services	life after cancer

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

Opening hours: Monday–Friday 9.30am–4.30pm

020 3826 2555

www.ljmc.org

Supporting people affected by cancer
from diagnosis, through treatment and beyond



Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre

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