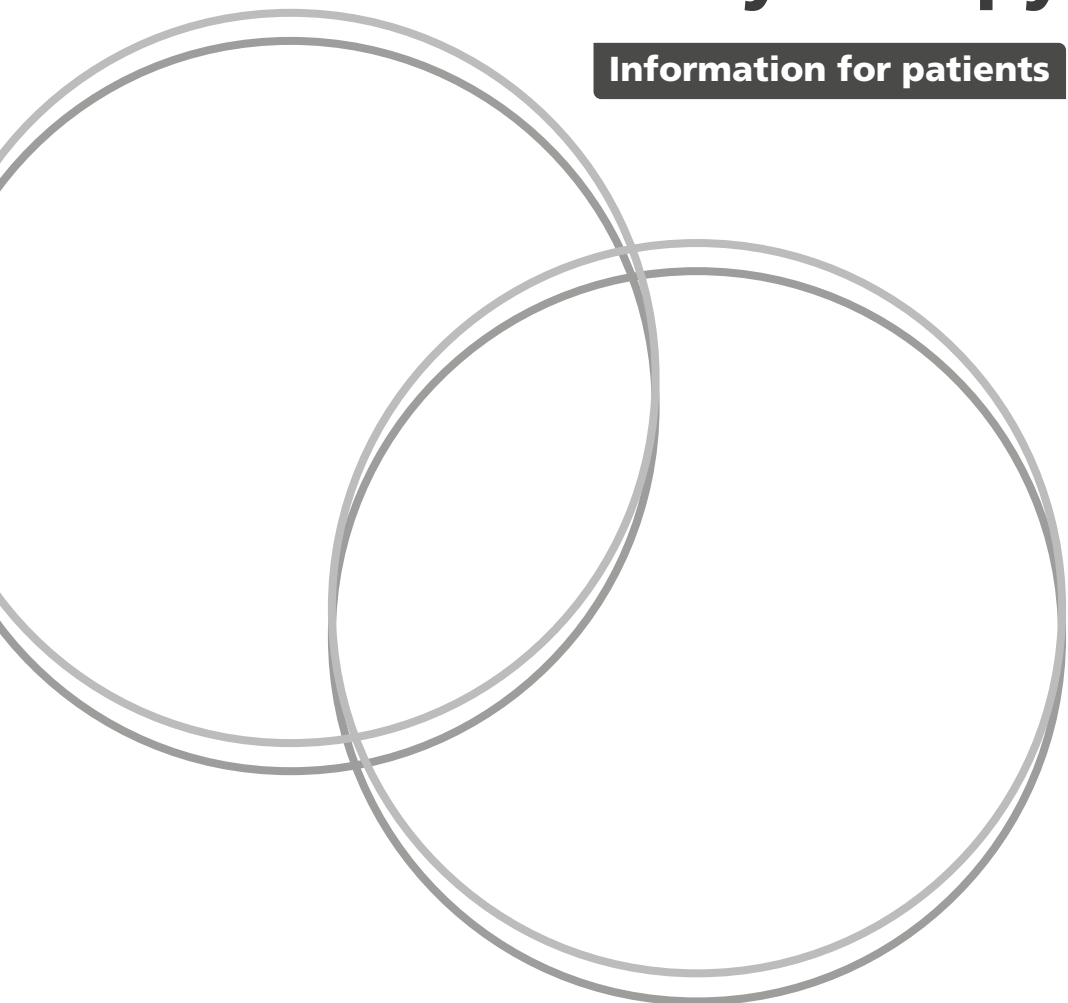


Vaginal dilator exercises for use after radiotherapy or brachytherapy

Information for patients



You have been given a pack of vaginal dilators to help prevent scarring and narrowing in your vagina, which can be caused by radiation.

Radiation treatment to the pelvis can often cause the vagina to become sore and inflamed. When this reduces, during the healing process, scars can begin to develop. These can cause shortening and tightening of the vagina. This can then lead to problems when you need to have an internal examination and also with sexual intercourse.

The treatment can also affect the cells that produce the natural vaginal lubricant, causing a 'dry' or uncomfortable sensation. These problems can occur from just a few weeks up to many months after your treatment.

By using the dilators regularly you may be able to minimise your risk of developing the scar tissue. We recommend that you use them regularly, whether or not you are engaging in regular sexual intercourse.

Sample lubricants are provided with most dilator sets. You will need to use lubricant for all these exercises. You can use any lubricant that you know suits you. Sometimes lubricants are available on prescription, or they are easy to order online or from your local chemist.

Advice on lubricants that don't contain many of the ingredients that irritate genital skin is available from your oncologist, radiographer, general practitioner (GP) or cancer specialist nurse.

The exercises

Two to three weeks after your treatment has finished, start to use the smallest dilator for very short periods of time – 1 to 2 minutes at a time.

It is best to practice little and often. By four to five weeks after the treatment has finished, you should be using your dilators for **a maximum of 5 minutes on 3 days a week.**

The aim is to progress slowly and steadily, being comfortable with each step before moving on. If you go too fast and provoke pain then you are likely to trigger muscle spasm and vaginal tightness, leading to more pain.

If you are unable to progress up the steps after weeks of trying, see your oncologist, GP or cancer specialist nurse. They may refer you on to someone for a more detailed examination and advice.

You will need to set aside some time each day to be relaxed and take your time with this process. If your muscles are to relax, you need to feel relaxed and not rushed. Last thing at night is not ideal, as it is easy to put it off when you are tired at the very end of the day.

How to use the dilators

Please remember: the idea is to do what you can without causing pain. You may feel a little discomfort when first starting the exercises.

- Start with the smallest size.
- Find a comfortable position – lying on the bed, lying in a warm bath, standing with one leg raised (foot supported) or standing in the shower (as long as you are stable).
- To prepare, you could try actively relaxing your pelvic floor muscles using your breathing.
- When you think your pelvic floor is relaxed, take your time to gently slip the smallest dilator (covered in lubricant) into your vagina. Most vaginas slope up and backwards towards your tailbone. It may help to focus on your breathing, to reduce any physical and mental tension. Insert the dilator as far as you can without causing yourself discomfort.
- Gently turn the dilator, so that the tip moves in a circle, keeping your pelvic floor relaxed. You will be able to increase the length of time gradually with practice. If you stop noticing that the dilator is in there this is great – you are really relaxed!
- When ready, try the next size up from the one you are using. You may find it helpful to try one minute of the size that you are comfortable with before using the larger size immediately after. Continue in this way until it is possible to insert the larger size straight into your vagina. The largest dilator in most sets is bigger than necessary - we suggest stopping at the second biggest size.
- Gradually increase the size of dilator you are using, remembering you should be comfortable with a given size for up to 5 minutes, feeling the muscles are fully relaxed around it, before you move on to the next size.

If these exercises cause bleeding, please discuss this with your oncologist, GP or cancer specialist nurse.

Cleaning the dilators

Dilators should be washed in hot soapy water and rinsed thoroughly after each use. **They do not need to be sterilised.** They can be stored in the case provided.

Sexual care after radiotherapy

A cancer diagnosis and radiotherapy treatment may affect how you feel about sex and intimate relationships. It may be that your thoughts and feelings associated with sex have been affected, or physically things are different from how they used to be.

An appointment at the Sexual Care after Radiotherapy Clinic offers a safe space to talk about any changes that may have occurred, explore what this means to you and look for solutions together. You can attend the appointment on your own or you can bring your partner with you as these changes may have affected them as well.

Please contact us if you would like to make an appointment or have any questions.

Email: sexualcareafterrt@ouh.nhs.uk

How to contact us

If you have any questions about your dilators, either during your treatment or after it has finished, please do not hesitate to contact your radiographer, oncologist, GP or cancer or radiotherapy specialist nurse.

During normal working hours:

Oxford Brachytherapy Radiographers	01865 226 289
Oxford Radiotherapy Specialist Nurses	01865 235 472
Consultant Therapeutic Radiographer (Gynae)	01865 227 213
Advanced Therapeutic Radiographer (Lower GI)	01865 235 464
Swindon Radiotherapy Reception	01865 220 680
Milton Keynes Radiotherapy	01865 857 579

Further information

If you would like an interpreter, please speak to the department where you are being seen.

Please also tell them if you would like this information in another format, such as:

- Easy Read
- large print
- braille
- audio
- electronic
- another language.

We have tried to make the information in this leaflet meet your needs. If it does not meet your individual needs or situation, please speak to your healthcare team. They are happy to help.

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