



For women, radiotherapy to the pelvis area can sometimes cause inflammation and scar tissue in the vagina. If this happens, sexual intercourse and medical examinations may be painful or difficult, and in some cases impossible.

What changes may happen?

The vagina can become shorter and more narrow (stenosis).

Your vagina may also become dry, sore and less stretchy.

How can I manage vaginal changes?

There are things you can do after your treatment to help keep the vagina open and the tissue soft and flexible. These include:

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

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

When do I start using a dilator?

The best time to start using a dilator can vary.

It is common to start between 2-8 weeks after your radiotherapy treatment has finished, allowing time for healing. Ask your treating team when to start.

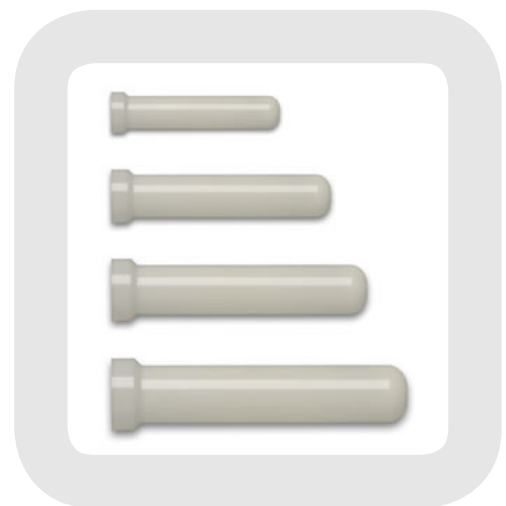
How often should I use the dilator?

Use the dilator as your specialist doctor advises. It is common to use it at least 3 times per week for 5-10 minutes each time as per your treating team.

Continue to use it for as long as your doctor advises. This time frame may vary between different women.

What is a dilator?

- A vaginal dilator is a smooth plastic tube with a rounded end.
- It is usually about 12-15cm long and comes in several sizes ranging from small to large (see picture below).



! Important

After you have finished treatment, it is important to try to start using dilators when your doctor or nurse advises you to. This will help prevent scar tissue from developing.

How do I use the dilator?

- Wash your hands and the dilator in warm soapy water and rinse well before each use.
- Lie down, or stand with one leg bent supported by a chair, bed, bath or toilet.
- Place a water based lubricant along the length of the dilator and around the entrance of your vagina before insertion.
- **Don't** use Vaseline or baby oil as some oils can cause irritation.
- Hold the dilator in one hand and with your other hand spread the lips at the opening of your vagina and gently insert the dilator.
- Try to relax - some resistance from your pelvic muscles is normal.
- Once inserted as far as possible, slowly and steadily rotate the dilator.
- Gently rotate the dilator as you remove it.
- When finished, remove the dilator and wash it in warm soapy water, rinse and dry.
- Store the dilator in a dry place where it will not become scratched or damaged.

Other tips for using a dilator

- Try to relax and take your time as tense muscles can make it more difficult.
- You can use the dilator during a bath or shower - this may help you to relax your pelvic floor muscles.
- Start with the smallest dilator first and when it is comfortable, you can move onto the next size.
- If using the dilator is painful when you first start, try again a few days later.
- Continue trying until using the dilator does not cause pain.
- If the insertion is tighter than normal, the dilator may need to be used more often.

Glossary

- **Vaginal stenosis** - narrowing or shortening of the vagina from radiotherapy
- **Dilator** - plastic tube used to prevent vaginal changes from radiotherapy
- **Pelvic floor muscles** - group of muscles which support the bladder and bowel

Common questions

What if I am still having sexual intercourse?

- Sexual intercourse will also stretch the vagina.
- If you are having sexual intercourse regularly (at least 3 times per week) using a dilator may not be necessary.

What happens if I bleed?

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

I have vaginal dryness, what can I use?

- Non-hormonal lubricants may be used and are available from your chemist.

What should I avoid?

- Douching, and some creams and perfumed soaps may cause irritation.
- If you are unsure, ask your doctor or nurse.

Where can I get some more information?

See the booklet *Recovering after Pelvic Radiation Therapy – A guide for women*.

sydney.edu.au/science/psychology/cemped/docs/Pelvic_Radiation_Therapy_Recovery_Booklet_for_Women.pdf



At your next visit, talk to your doctor if you:

- have problems or pain when you are having sexual intercourse or using dilators
- feel anxious or depressed
- have any questions about changes to your body.

Contact numbers:

Daytime:

Night/weekend: