

Improving Vaginal Health After Radiation Therapy

Radiation therapy, certain types of pelvic surgery, or menopause can cause changes to your body. These may affect the vagina. It can become drier, less elastic, narrower, and shorter. You may or may not notice these changes. For example, if you are sexually active, intercourse may be painful. If you are not sexually active, this may not be a concern to you. However, these changes can make it hard for the doctor to do a pelvic exam. This is important after your treatment. You can do a number of things to improve your vaginal health.

Vaginal Moisturizers

Moisturizers help to relieve vaginal drying. Use Replens® two to three times a week as directed on the package. This is available without a prescription in most drug stores. If you have trouble finding it, call 800-252-0454.

Vaginal Lubricants

Use a vaginal lubricant when you have intercourse. This will make intercourse more comfortable and will prevent injury to the vaginal membranes. Also, use the lubricant each time you use your dilator (see below). Use only water-based lubricants. Examples are:

- Surgilube®.
- K-Y® Jelly.
- Astroglide®. You may have trouble finding this one at your drugstore. You can order it by calling 800-848-5900.

Never use petroleum jelly or Vaseline®. Do **not** use lubricants that:

- Make the skin feel warm.
- Have colors.
- Have flavors.
- Kill bacteria.

These can irritate your vagina.

Vaginal Dilator

A vaginal dilator stretches your vagina. This can minimize narrowing and shortening. Your nurse will give you the dilator and teach you how to use it.

- Start using the dilator after you finish treatment. Your doctor or nurse will tell you when it is safe to start and how often to use it.
 - Start using the dilator _____ weeks after your last radiation treatment.
 - Start using the dilator _____ weeks after your surgery.
 - Use the dilator _____ time(s) a week.
- Use the dilator for the rest of your life. Use it even if you are having intercourse.

- Tell your doctor or nurse if it hurts to use the dilator. Your doctor may prescribe medicine to help ease pain.

How to Use Your Dilator

1. Set aside private time to use the dilator.
2. Gather all the equipment you will need:
 - Dilator
 - Lubricant
 - A towel
 - Pillows
3. Prepare to do something that will help you relax. For example, have a:
 - Television remote to watch TV.
 - Radio or CD player to listen to music.
 - Book or magazine to read.
4. Wash your hands.
5. Go to a private area where you can lay down.
6. Place pillows to support your shoulders and neck. You do not want to pull yourself up with your abdominal muscles. Position yourself in a “frog” position. This can be done by lying down against the pillows with your knees bent at a 45-degree angle. They should be shoulder width apart. Rest your feet comfortably on the bed or couch. Make sure you can easily touch the opening of your vagina. Use a hand mirror if you need it.
7. The first time you use the dilator, select the smallest one.
8. Squeeze some lubricant on your hand and apply it to the labia, the lips outside the vagina. Also apply a generous amount of lubricant to the outside of the dilator.
9. Using gentle pressure, slowly insert the round end of the dilator into the opening of your vagina.
10. Take several slow deep breaths. Gently insert the dilator into the vagina as you breathe out. Always insert it at a flat or slightly upward angle. Never insert at a downward angle. Once the dilator is inserted, try to relax your muscles. While breathing out, push the dilator in further until you feel discomfort or resistance. It is normal to have such discomfort. The dilator will only go in a few inches.
11. Gently press the dilator against each side of the vagina to permit those tissues to stretch. If there is any tenderness or tightness along the walls of the vagina, very gently press the dilator in that direction and hold for a few seconds.
12. The dilator may start to slowly slip out of the vagina. Hold it in place using gentle pressure to keep it inserted as deeply as possible. Keep it in place for ten minutes if you can. This may be difficult in the beginning or when you start a new size dilator.
13. The dilator should feel snug but not painful when you insert it into your vagina. Once the dilator is inserted, you may do Kegel exercises while the dilator is inside. Tense and release the muscles you would use to stop your urine stream. Think of this as physical therapy for your vagina. Stay on your back and try to keep your legs relaxed.
14. Remove the dilator when the time is up. Wash it with soap and warm water. Do not use anything but soap and water. Dry it with a clean towel after each use. Store it as instructed in the kit.

15. If you were able to keep the dilator in place for 10 full minutes without much discomfort, the next time you use the dilator use the next larger size. If you had discomfort, continue with the same size until this becomes easier.
16. Many women need help as they begin using the dilator, so do not feel alone. If it hurts, stop and call your doctor or nurse for advice and more information. You can also call the Sexual Health Program for help. The number is 212-639-8480.
17. It is also normal for the vagina to have a small amount of bleeding when you use the dilator. A panty liner will be enough to manage this. If you have a lot of bleeding, call your doctor. Soaking a sanitary napkin would be a lot of bleeding.

Vaginal Hormone Replacement

Some patients may be able to use local vaginal estrogen therapy. It comes in a cream, a ring, or a tablet. This medicine requires a prescription. Discuss these with your doctor before using them to be sure they are safe for you.

Conclusion

Using these products may feel awkward at first. Remember that using them will help you recover from the effects of treatment. If you need help or more information, call your nurse or the Sexual Health Program.

Important Telephone Numbers

Doctor _____ Telephone _____

Nurse _____ Telephone _____

Sexual Health Program Telephone 212-639-8480

