A guide to dilation following radiotherapy

What is vaginal dilation?
Vaginal dilation simply means to stretch and open the vagina. Having sexual intercourse stretches the vagina. Using a vaginal dilator also stretches the vagina.

Position of the vagina and surrounding organs


What is a vaginal dilator?
A vaginal dilator is a smooth plastic tube, with a handle. It comes in four sizes. You will be given a set of dilators during or at the end of your radiotherapy treatment.

Most women will only start to use these several weeks after their radiotherapy treatment is completed.
Some women prefer to use sexual intercourse or sexual aides, such as vibrators, to dilate the vagina instead of dilators. This can work just as well, however, it is advisable to discuss this further with your clinical nurse specialist (CNS).

**Why do I need to dilate my vagina?**

One of the long term side effects after having radiotherapy is the narrowing, shortening and scarring of the vaginal passage. Your doctors may refer to this as vaginal ‘fibrosis’. Your vagina will have less natural moisture and lubrication.

By using a vaginal dilator and/or having sexual intercourse regularly you can help to prevent this scarring and maintain your vagina’s ability to stretch.

**Whether you are sexually active or not, using the dilators may:**

- allow doctors to fully examine you internally, without causing discomfort
- maintain the sexual function of your vagina, helping to prevent painful sexual intercourse in the future
- help you to feel more confident about your body and returning to sexual intercourse.

Some women do still experience some vaginal shortening and narrowing even when they have used vaginal dilators.

**When should I start using my dilators?**

If you have no vaginal discomfort, smelly discharge or bleeding it is fine to start your dilations within a few weeks of having your internal radiotherapy (brachytherapy). If you have been having external beam radiotherapy to the pelvis, your doctor or nurse may suggest that you start using dilators during your treatment.

**How should I use the dilator?**

1. Find a private, comfortable place, (for example, a bedroom or bathroom).
2. Place a water-soluble lubricant, such as **Sylk**, **Aquagel** or **K-Y Jelly**, on the rounded end of the dilator and around the entrance to the vagina.
3. Lie down on your back with your knees bent and slightly apart, or stand with one leg raised on the side of the bed or bath. You will then be able to use the dilator as you would if inserting a tampon.
4. Insert the dilator into your vagina, as gently and as deeply as is comfortable. **Do not force the dilator.**
5. Gently move the dilator forward and back, then from left to right inside the vagina. Repeat this several times for 3–5 minutes.
6. After use, remove the dilator, wash it with soapy water, rinse well and dry.

**Dilator inside the vagina:**

![Image of dilator inside vagina]


**How often should I dilate my vagina?**

Your vagina needs to be dilated three times a week. This can be:
- with the dilator
- with sexual intercourse
- through use of a sexual aid (vibrator)
- through a combination of the above.

**How long do I need to dilate my vagina for after treatment is finished?**

As this is a long-term side effect, if you stop dilating, your vagina may develop the radiation changes described earlier (see page 2 for more information). Once the changes have occurred it is not possible to reverse them. These changes can happen gradually, within weeks of stopping your dilution. If you wish to prevent the shortening and narrowing of your vagina, you may need to use dilators for the rest of your life.

*Although we advise using dilators, if you are aware of the potential changes to the vagina as a result of radiotherapy and do not wish to use dilators, you must not feel that you have to use them.*

**What happens if I bleed or have pain after dilating?**

You may get a few spots of blood on your underwear after using dilators. This is because the dilator is separating tissue.

If you experience any pain or heavy bleeding when using the dilator, please consult your hospital doctor or clinical nurse specialist (see over the page for contact details).

If you have any concerns regarding the information contained in this leaflet please speak to your hospital doctor, clinical nurse specialist (CNS) or radiographer.

**Gynaecological oncology CNS**

Monday to Friday, between 9am and 5pm.
020 7188 2707 (24 hour answer phone)
Coping with cancer

It is common for women diagnosed with cancer to have concerns. These may vary amongst women, but most commonly include concerns about the success of cancer treatments, about their cancer returning, the impact cancer treatments may have on close or intimate relationships, financial worries and the ability to continue with social and work engagements.

Some women may feel overwhelmed by their emotions. They may feel low in mood, have difficulty sleeping or worried about the future. For many women these feelings will gradually lesson over time, but for some women receiving some additional support can be helpful. Discussing your concerns with the staff involved in your treatment, such as you clinical nurse specialist or doctor as well as your family and friends, is important. It may help you to find answers to the questions that you are asking yourself.

Dimbleby Cancer Care is the cancer support service for Guy’s and St Thomas’. They have drop-in information centres, and also offer complementary therapies, psychological support and benefits advice.

The drop-in information centre is located in Guy’s in Oncology Outpatients (Ground floor, Tabard Annexe).

t: 020 7188 5918  e: RichardDimblebyCentre@gstt.nhs.uk

Guy’s and St Thomas’ hospitals offer a range of cancer-related information leaflets for patients and carers, available at www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/patientleaflets/cancer

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline
If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.
t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

PALS
To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust’s services, please contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). Ask a member of staff to direct you to PALS or:
t: 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas’  t: 020 7188 8803 at Guy’s  e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk

Language Support Services
If you need an interpreter or information about the care you are receiving in the language or format of your choice, please get in touch using the following contact details:
t: 020 7188 8815  fax: 020 7188 5953  e: languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk