

# Vaginal Dilators

## *Information for Patients*

### **In this document you will learn about:**

- How cancer treatments may affect your vagina
- How a vaginal dilator may help you
- How to use vaginal dilators
- Where to buy vaginal dilators

### **How do cancer treatments affect my vagina?**

Surgery and radiation treatment to the pelvic area can cause scar tissue to form in the vagina, resulting in the tissue becoming less elastic and dry. This may lead to potential shrinkage of the vagina and/or the vaginal opening. If this happens, you may find it difficult to dilate (widen/open up) your vagina for intercourse and pelvic exams.

Vaginal dilators can be used to prevent or manage this side effect.

### **What are vaginal dilators?**

A vaginal dilator is a smooth plastic, silicone, or rubber cylinder, similar in shape to a tampon. The dilator works by stretching the tissue of the vagina, helping to make intercourse more comfortable and improve the ease of pelvic exams performed by doctors after cancer treatment. Dilators can be purchased on their own or as a set.





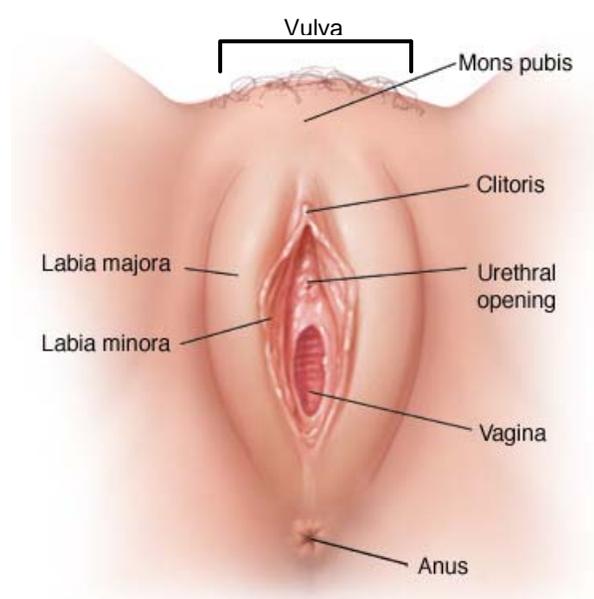
Some women use a vibrator, a dildo or their fingers instead of vaginal dilators. Most vaginas are 3-5 inches in length, so fingers alone may not be enough. Do not use candles (may contain lead) or food items (they cannot be properly cleaned).

Vaginal dilators are to be used once your radiation treatments are finished and vaginal irritation has decreased (typically 2-4 weeks after your last radiation treatment).

Women who have vaginismus may also benefit from using vaginal dilators. Vaginismus is an involuntary contraction, or reflex muscle tightening, of the pelvic floor muscles that generally occurs when an attempt is made to insert an object (tampon, penis, speculum used for a Pap test) into the vagina. Vaginal dilators can be very effective tools in helping to stop these contractions, making intercourse or pelvic exams more comfortable.

## The female genital area

Here is a diagram of the names of the body parts and where they are located:



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## Steps to dilating your vagina

1. Find a private and comfortable place where you can relax.
2. Begin by cleaning the dilator with soapy water and applying a water-based lubricant (e.g. K-Y® Jelly, Astroglide® Liquid) to the entire dilator as well as to the vaginal opening. Do not use oil-based or silicone lubricants as they may damage the dilators.
3. Lay on your back with your knees bent and slightly apart. This may be done in a bathtub of lukewarm water, or on a bed. Some women prefer standing with one leg raised on the side of the bed or bath.
4. Start with the smallest dilator. Spread your labia with one hand, and with the other hand, hold the dilator at the opening of your vagina.
5. Do some deep breathing and relax the muscles of the pelvic floor (see Kegels section, page 6). As you exhale, and using firm but gentle pressure, insert the rounded end of the dilator into the vagina as far as possible, without forcing the dilator.



You may want to insert the dilator gradually, a bit at a time. Just remember to breathe out each time you insert it further.

6. If the dilator goes in easily, without difficulty, remove it and try the next size up, and so on. When you try the next size up, it may feel a little tight and uncomfortable at first. This is normal.
7. Once you have inserted the dilator as far as it can comfortably go, gently turn it both ways, move it up and down, and side to side.
8. Keep the dilator in for about 5 minutes (no less than 3 minutes and no more than 10 minutes).
9. Remove the dilator, wash it with soap and water and let it air dry.

## How often should I dilate?

Because there is limited study in this area, there is no single answer from experts as to how often women should dilate. Dilate often enough so that the desired size dilator can be inserted without difficulty.

In general:

### **For the first 6 months of using a dilator:**

3 times a week is usually enough for most women.

### **From 6 months to 1 year:**

Dilate at least once per week. If you find it becomes challenging to insert the dilator, dilate more often.

### **After 1 year:**

Dilate once per month. If you find it becomes challenging to insert the dilator, start dilating more often. Some women need to continue regular dilation once or twice per week for 2, 3, 4 or 5 years.

## What can I expect when I use the dilator?

- As you go up in dilator size, it may take a few weeks to feel an increase in the size of the vaginal opening and a softening of the vaginal tissues.
- You may need more or less time using dilators depending on a number of factors, but if you haven't been able to increase the size of the dilator for several weeks then contact a member of your Cancer Centre Care Team.
- Using vaginal dilators and dealing with changes to your sexual health may bring up strong emotions – this is normal. Talk about your feelings with someone you trust or a social worker at the Cancer Centre. You can make an appointment with a social worker by calling 705-728-9090 x43520.
- Minimal spotting and/or vaginal bleeding is possible due to dilation. If you experience heavy bleeding, contact your doctor immediately.
- Some women include their partners in dilating.
- Women can reduce or stop dilation if they are having regular intercourse (or other vaginal penetration) a couple of times a week and if they no longer require pelvic exams.

### See a doctor if any of these symptoms occur:

- Itching in the pelvic area.
- Persistent (long-lasting) physical discomfort in the pelvic area.
- Vaginal discharge with strong odour.
- Abdominal pain.
- Fever.

## Kegel exercises: a how-to guide for women

### What are Kegels?

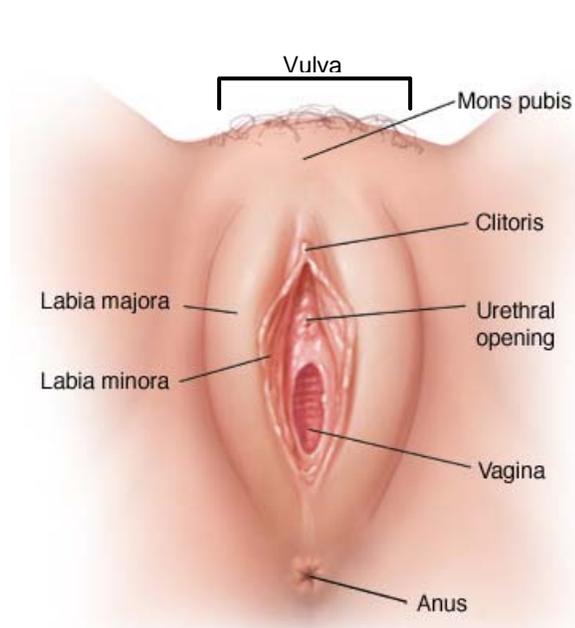
Kegel exercises, also called pelvic floor muscle training, involve tightening and relaxing the muscles of your pelvic floor. These exercises have many benefits including reducing vaginal or pelvic pain during sex. Kegels help us to recognize when our pelvic muscles are tight and when they are relaxed. Kegels can also increase natural lubrication in the vagina.

### How to do Kegel exercises:

You may have to try a few times to find your pelvic floor muscles and learn how to contract and relax them. Here are some pointers:

**Find the right muscles.** To identify your pelvic floor muscles, stop urinating midstream. If you succeed, you've got the right muscles.

To check that you are tensing the right muscle, put a water-based lubricant on the tip of your finger or on a tampon with a rounded plastic applicator. Lie on your back with your knees up and apart, or try sitting against some pillows with your knees bent and open. Hold the lubricated finger or tampon at the entrance to your vagina. If you are unsure of the exact location of the vaginal entrance, look at yourself in a hand mirror or lighted make-up mirror. You can use the following diagram as a guide.



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It may be easier to see if you use your hands to gently spread the inner lips apart. Try to squeeze the pelvic floor muscle and then let it go loose. When you feel the muscle is relaxed, slip just the lubricated tip of the finger or tampon into your vagina. Hold it there and try squeezing the pelvic floor muscles again. You should be able to feel your vagina move a little, gently squeezing on the finger or tampon. The pelvic floor muscles only surround the outer inch or

two of your vagina. The deeper part of the vagina cannot squeeze voluntarily.

**Perfect your technique.** Once you've identified your pelvic floor muscles, empty your bladder and lie on your back. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles, hold the contraction for 5 seconds, and then relax for 5 seconds. Try it 4 or 5 times in a row. Work up to keeping the muscles contracted for 10 seconds at a time, relaxing for 10 seconds between contractions.

**Maintain your focus.** For best results, focus on tightening only your pelvic floor muscles. Be careful not to flex the muscles in your abdomen, thighs or buttocks. Avoid holding your breath. Instead, breathe freely during the exercises.

**Repeat 3 times a day.** Aim for at least 3 sets of 10 repetitions a day.

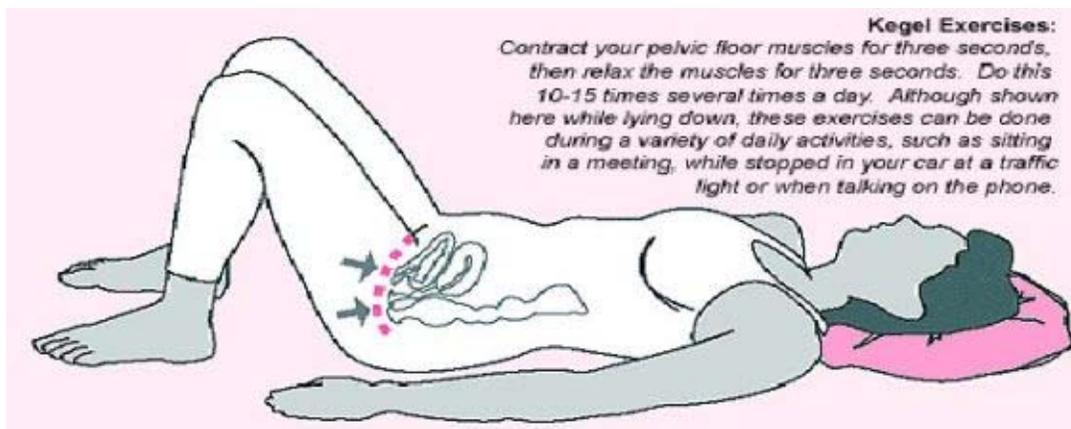


Photo credit: Robinson, Beck, Walker & Lee Couples' Sexuality Workshop. The Prostate Cancer Centre

You can do Kegel exercises, just about anytime without anyone noticing!

Doing a Kegel just before inserting a vaginal dilator can help to ensure that your pelvic muscles are relaxed. Start by tightening your muscles and then really focus on relaxing them completely before inserting the vaginal dilator.

## Where can I buy vaginal dilators?

The PureHealth Pharmacy at Royal Victoria Regional Health Centre stocks dilator kits. Dilator kits are also sold online (e.g. pureromance.com, stagshop.com and comeasyouare.com). Some sex/adult shops sell them as well.

## For more information

Websites:

American Cancer Society [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

The North American Menopause Society [www.menopause.org](http://www.menopause.org)

Book:

*Woman Cancer Sex* by Anne Katz. Published 2009. ISBN 978-1890504809.

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