

Vaginal Stenosis

For patients who would like help preventing and/or managing vaginal stenosis



In this booklet you will learn about:

- How cancer treatment can affect your vagina
- What vaginal dilators are and how they work
- How to dilate
- How to perform Kegel exercises
- Where to buy vaginal dilators

How do cancer treatments affect your vagina?

- Surgery and radiation treatment to the pelvic area can cause scar tissue to form in the vagina. This can make the tissue inside your vagina dryer and less elastic.
- This may cause the vagina to get shorter and more narrow called vaginal stenosis. This can happen in the vagina or at the opening of your vagina.
- If this happens, you might find it hard to dilate (open up/widen) your vagina for intercourse (sex) or 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 or rubber cylinder (tube), similar in shape to that of a tampon.
- Dilators can be purchased on their own or as a set.



What are vaginal dilators? Continued

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

How do vaginal dilators work?

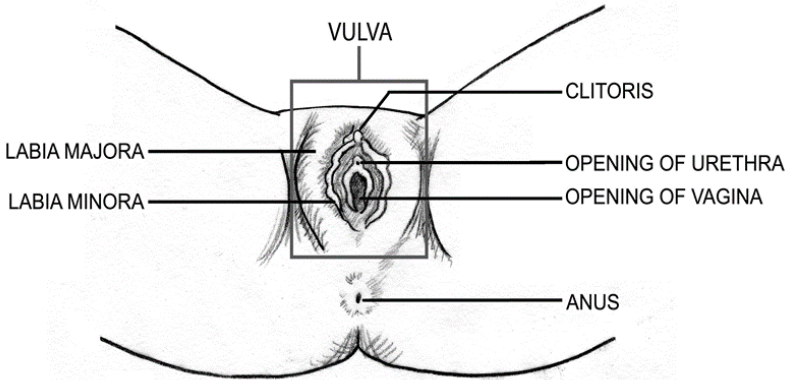
- Dilators stretch the tissue of the vagina and the opening of the vagina. This helps to make intercourse and pelvic exams easier and more comfortable.
- Dilators can also help to decrease the involuntary contractions that are experienced by women who have vaginismus. Vaginismus is an involuntary contraction, 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.

NOTE

- You should only use a vaginal dilator after your radiation treatments are finished and vaginal irritation has decreased (typically 2-4 weeks after your last radiation treatment).

The Female Genital Area

This is a picture of the female genital area. It indicates that name and location of each part of the genital region.



How Often Should I Dilate?

- There is limited studies in this area. For this reason, there are no agreed upon guidelines about how often women should dilate. Dilate often enough so that the desired size dilator can be inserted without difficulty.
- **For the first 6 months:** Dilating 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.

Steps to Dilating your Vagina

1. Clean the dilator with soapy water and applying a water-soluble lubricant (Ex. K-Y Jelly, Astroglide) 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).
2. Find a private and comfortable place where you can relax.
3. Lay on your back with your knees bent and slightly apart. This may be done in a bathtub of lukewarm water. Some women prefer standing with one leg raised on the side of the bed or bath.
4. Spread your labia with one hand and hold the dilator at the opening of your vagina with your other hand.
5. Do some deep breathing and relax the muscles of the pelvic floor (see Kegels). 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, in steps– 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 comfortable go, gently turn it both ways, move it up and down, and side to side.

NOTES

- Keep the dilator in for about 5 minutes (no less than 3 minutes and no more than 10 minutes).
- Remove the dilator, wash it and let it air dry.

What Can I Expect?

- It may take a few weeks to feel an increase in the size of the vaginal opening and a softening of the tissues with each sized dilator. You may need more or less time using dilators depending on a number of factors. If you haven't been able to increase the size of the dilator for several weeks then contact a member of your cancer care team.
- Using vaginal dilators and dealing with changes to your sexual health may cause you to be emotional – this is normal. Talk about your feelings with someone you trust or a social worker at the SMRCP.
- Minimal spotting and/or vaginal bleeding is possible due to dilation. If heavy bleeding is experienced, contact physician immediately
- Seek medical advice if any of the following symptoms occur: Itching, persistent physical discomfort, fever, vaginal discharge with strong odour or abdominal pain
- 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.

Kegel Exercises: A How-To Guide For Women

What are Kegels?

- Kegel exercises 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 tightening and when they are relaxed.

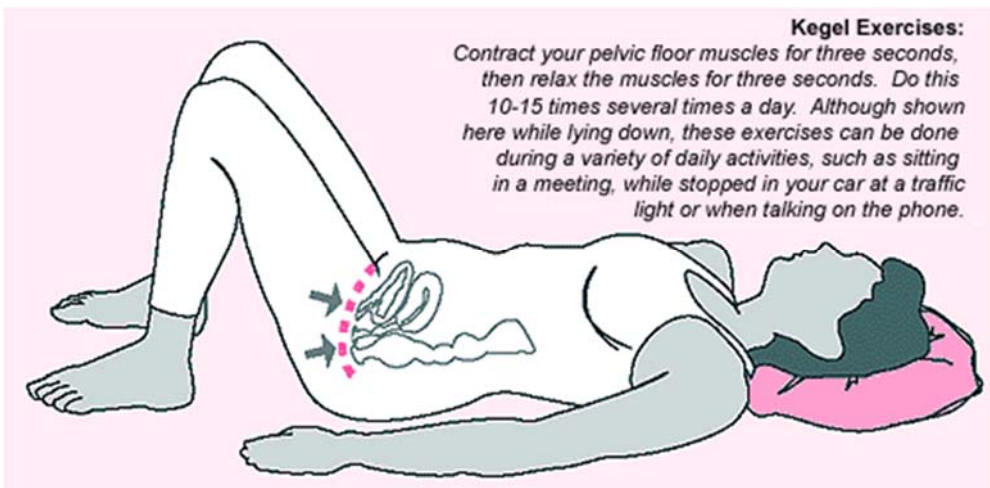
How to do Kegel exercises

It takes diligence to identify 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 urination in midstream. If you succeed, you've got the right muscles.
- **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.

Kegel Exercises: A How-To Guide For Women Continued

- **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.
- You can do Kegel exercises, also known as pelvic floor muscle training, discreetly just about anytime.
- 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?

Available for Purchase from:

- The PureHealth Pharmacy in RVH stocks dilator kits
- Dilator kits are also sold online at websites like:
www.pureromance.com, www.stagshop.com and
www.comeasyouare.com.
- Some sex/adult shops sell them as well. Many women find silicone dilators to be best.

Complimentary dilators available from:

- * SMRCP: Ask you cancer care team for details

Resources

<https://www.oncolink.org>

How to find us



Cancer Centre

The Cancer Centre is located in Royal Victoria Regional Health Centre (RVH) at 201 Georgian Drive.

Once you walk into the main entrance, the Cancer Centre is on the left side. There is a receptionist who can help direct you.



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