


## Kent Oncology Centre

# Advice about using dilators after radiotherapy

Your Consultant Oncologist may have recommended you have external beam radiotherapy to the pelvis or internal radiotherapy (brachytherapy), or both. They both have side effects which will have been discussed with you before you gave your consent.

This leaflet explains how dilators can reduce the long term effects this treatment can have on the vagina. If you have any concerns please feel free to contact the Macmillan team on the numbers given below:

Macmillan Radiotherapy Specialists

 01622 225094

### Side effects of radiotherapy or brachytherapy on the vagina

Radiotherapy and brachytherapy can reduce natural vaginal lubrication, causing vaginal dryness, irritation and soreness. Sometimes scar tissue (fibrosis) can form, causing narrowing or shortening of the vaginal walls. We recommend using vaginal dilators to help reduce the risk of scarring within the vagina.

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## Benefits of a vaginal dilator

A vaginal dilator is a plastic cylinder specially shaped to be used inside the vagina. Whether you are sexually active or not, using dilators to maintain the form of the vaginal wall will:

- Reduce potential long-term discomfort that vaginal scarring can cause
- Allow the medical team to examine you internally, if required, without causing discomfort
- Help to prevent intercourse from being uncomfortable or reduce potential difficulties with future sexual partners if you are not in a sexually active relationship at the present time

## When do I start using dilators?

We recommend that you start using the dilator about three to four weeks after your last treatment. If you still feel sore and uncomfortable then leave it longer; sometimes this could be up to six weeks.

We advise you try to use the dilator around three times a week for about six months to a year after your treatment. If you are sexually active you can alternate the use of the dilator with sexual intercourse.

## Using your dilator

- We suggest you find a private and comfortable place where you can use the dilator.
  - Place a water soluble lubricant on the part of the dilator that will be placed inside the vagina, and also around the entrance of the vagina. Your radiotherapy specialist can offer some suggestions on lubricants to try. Some dilators are supplied with a lubricant. When you require further supplies contact your local pharmacy or your GP as some lubricants are available on prescription.
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- You can use the dilator in whichever way you find most comfortable. You may wish to lie down on your back with your knees slightly apart or bent, or stand with one leg raised on the side of the bed or bath and use the dilator as you would insert a tampon.
  - You may use the dilator whilst showering or bathing as long as the water is free from perfumed products.
  - Use firm gentle pressure; insert the dilator into the vagina as gently and deeply as is comfortable. Try to relax your muscles and do not force the dilator.
  - Once the dilator is inside the vagina, gently move it forward and back and from left to right. Use a circular motion as you move the dilator. Repeat this several times for about three to five minutes.
  - After use, remove the dilator; wash it with soapy water, rinse well and dry.
  - Store the dilator in the case or plastic bag it was provided in.
  - Some women find they experience discomfort after using the dilator for the first time. If you do we suggest you use a mild painkiller that you normally use, e.g. paracetamol.
  - Afterwards, if you have spotting or slight bleeding do not be alarmed. This will be due to break down of scar tissue.
  - If you have any heavy bleeding or pains when using the dilator then stop using it and contact your GP, radiotherapy specialist or nurse specialist.
  - If you have internal vaginal examinations as part of your follow up appointments your doctor will be able to let you know if using the dilator has helped to stop scar tissue forming.
  - If you experience vaginal dryness, you may find it beneficial to use a vaginal moisturiser. There are various products available at the pharmacy. You may wish to discuss this with your GP as some products may be available on prescription.
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Reference:

International Guidelines on Vaginal Dilation after Pelvic Radiotherapy (International Clinical Guideline Group chaired by Dr Tracie Miles, President, National Forum of Gynaecological Oncology Nurses, UK)

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Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust welcomes all forms of feedback from our service users. If the standard of service you have received from the Trust does not meet your expectations, we want to hear from you. Please speak with the ward manager or the nurse in charge in the first instance, or you can contact the **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)** on:

**Telephone:** ☎ 01622 224960 or ☎ 01892 632953

**Email:** [mtw-tr.palsoffice@nhs.net](mailto:mtw-tr.palsoffice@nhs.net)

**or visit their office** at either Maidstone or Tunbridge Wells Hospital between 9.00am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

You can be confident that your care will not be affected by highlighting any areas of concern or making a complaint. The Trust will retain a record of your contact, which is held separately to any medical records. If you are acting on behalf of a patient, we may need to obtain the patient's consent in order to protect patient confidentiality. More information on PALS or making a complaint can be found on the Trust's website: [www.mtw.nhs.uk](http://www.mtw.nhs.uk) or pick up a leaflet from main reception.

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