

Information for
patients & families

Using a Dilator



Symptom Management

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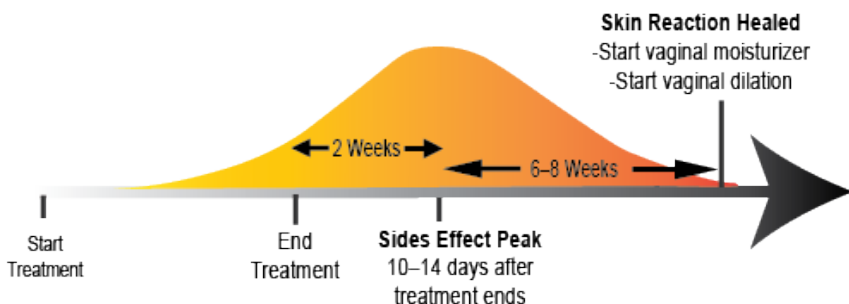
Introduction

How will radiation affect my vagina and vulva?

Radiation treatment to the pelvic area can cause side effects to develop in the vagina and vulva area. These side effects can happen for gynecological, rectal, anal canal, and other cancers in the pelvis.



The radiation may cause swelling and redness inside and around your vagina and vulva during and after your treatment. This may get worse 2 weeks after your treatments are finished, but then you will begin to heal.



When the swelling and redness start to heal, your vagina and vulvar tissue may feel dry. Your vagina may also start to slowly narrow or shrink. The dryness and narrowing of your vagina can make it difficult to have pelvic exams, and you may find sexual intercourse painful.

Even if you're not sexually active, it is important to keep the flexibility and moisture of your vaginal tissue for your comfort and for future pelvic examinations.

What can I do to reduce vaginal and vulvar dryness and shrinking?

As soon as your skin and vaginal tissues have healed, about 6–8 weeks after treatment finishes, begin to:

1. Use a vaginal moisturizer
2. Perform perineal massage
3. Use a dilator

You may be given a vaginal dilator at the end of your radiation treatments. You can also buy vaginal dilators online. Search for “silicone vaginal dilators”.

It is important to make moisturizing and dilating your vaginal tissues a part of your routine to prevent them from narrowing and shrinking. You may need to do this for a year.

Vaginal Moisturizers

What is a vaginal moisturizer?

If you have vaginal dryness, your vagina and vulvar tissue may feel irritated, itchy, or even painful. Dryness can make pelvic exams and sexual activities uncomfortable.

Moisturizers help keep the lining of the vagina moist and healthy. These products can last all day, and are often used for life if needed.

You can buy vaginal moisturizers without a prescription. Examples of moisturizers include Replens®, Repagyn®, Gynatrof®, Zestica®, and Premeno®.

What about estrogen-based moisturizers?

Your doctor may suggest an estrogen-based vaginal moisturizer. Estrogen may help make your vaginal tissue more elastic, less tender, and better lubricated.

If you have cancer that is affected by estrogen, **do not use** an estrogen-based moisturizer. Ask your cancer doctor before using one of these products.

What about personal lubricants?

Personal lubricants can be used for sexual activity, but they will **not help** with vaginal dryness. You must use vaginal moisturizers to help with vaginal dryness.

How do I use a vaginal moisturizer?

Some vaginal moisturizers come in gel or cream and are put inside the vagina using a tampon-shaped applicator. Others come in a solid capsule that's put in the vagina with a finger.

How often do I use a vaginal moisturizer?

You can start using a vaginal moisturizer as soon as your side effects from radiation treatment have healed. Use the vaginal moisturizer at least 3 times a week, or every other day.

Try inserting the moisturizer before bed — it might leak out of the vagina if you are standing, sitting, or walking. Make sure to rub some moisturizer into the tissues surrounding your vagina (vulva).

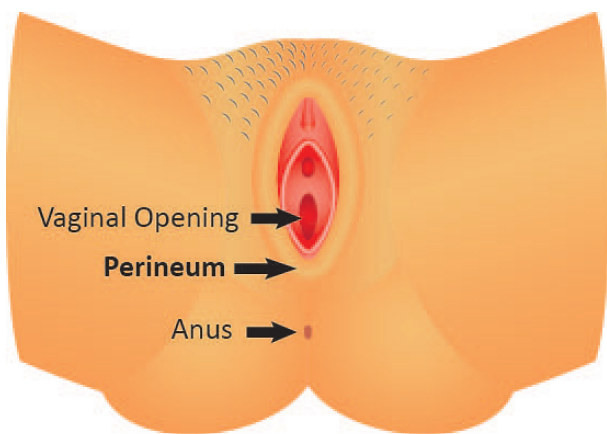
For the first 2 weeks, vaginal moisturizers can increase your vaginal discharge. After this, your discharge should decrease. It's important to give the moisturizer a chance to start working. The extra discharge means the vaginal tissue is shedding old tissue and is being replaced with new healthier tissue.

If you get a burning feeling, it will often feel better after using the moisturizer a few times. If it doesn't feel better, try a different product or speak to your doctor.

Perineal Massage

What is a perineum?

The perineum is the muscle and tissue between your vagina and your anus. Stretching and massaging this area can help reduce any pain you might feel when using a dilator or having intercourse.



What is perineal massage?

A perineal massage involves placing a lubricated finger into the vagina and gently stretching the tissue around it by pulling it out to the side in a clockwise motion. Stretching the tissue helps it become more flexible and can reduce pain from inserting a dilator or during intercourse.

Massage your perineum for 5 minutes a day, 3–4 times a week. At first, it may burn and feel uncomfortable. This should get better after a few massages.

How do I perform perineal massage?

It can help to have some lubricant, and a hand mirror, you may also want a partner to help you.

1. Sit with your legs apart and your back supported.
2. Use a hand mirror to see your perineum.
3. Place some lubricant on your fingers.
4. Place a thumb or finger about 5 cm (2 inches) into your vagina.
5. Gently pull the tissue out to the side. Call this 3 o'clock.
6. Still pressing and stretching outward, sweep your finger down to 6 o'clock and over to 9 o'clock.



7. Repeat for a total of 4 or 5 minutes.

Using a Dilator

What is a dilator?

A dilator is a rod or cylinder with a rounded end. They can be made from softer silicone or from plastic.

Vaginal dilators are put inside the vagina to dilate, open and stretch the tissues. Sexual intercourse can also help to stretch your vagina. Use lubricant when using a dilator.

See the “Choosing a Personal Lubricant” handout to choose a lubricant that works with your dilator (for example, use a water-based lubricant with a silicone based dilator).



Urology Health Store Canada



When should I use a dilator?

Start using your dilator 6–8 weeks after your radiation treatments are finished, or when your side effects from treatment have healed. Use your dilator at least 3 times a week. If you can, try to use it more often.

Why is using a dilator important?

Using your dilator soon after treatment and adding it to your daily routine will help prevent scar tissue. The narrowing of your vagina can still happen years after your radiation treatments have ended. Your cancer doctor will talk to you about how long you should use a dilator.

How do I use a dilator?

1. Wash your hands
2. Gather these items:
 - Dilator
 - Lubricant
 - Towel
 - Pillows, blankets, or things to make you comfortable
3. Lie down in an area where you can have privacy. If you have a partner, you can invite them to help you, if you feel comfortable.
4. Lie on your back with your feet flat on the bed or couch and your knees slightly bent. Spread your legs apart. Make sure you can easily reach the opening of your vagina. Use a hand mirror if you need to.
5. Use your fingers to rub a lubricant onto your labia (the skin folds around the opening of the vagina) and to the rounded end of the dilator.
6. Separate your labia with your fingers and gently insert the dilator at a flat or slightly upward angle (toward your belly button) as you breathe out.
7. Once the dilator is inserted, relax as much as possible and focus on relaxing your pelvic muscles.
 - Push the dilator in further until you feel resistance, but not pain. Some discomfort is normal. Tell your cancer doctor if you feel pain when using a dilator.
 - Slowly move the dilator forward, backward, to the right and to the left (as much as is comfortable).
 - Try to keep the dilator inserted for 10 minutes.

8. Once you have finished using the dilator:

- Remove it slowly from your vagina.
- Wash it with warm, soapy water.
- Rinse it well so that there is no soap residue.
- Dry the dilator completely using a clean towel.
- Keep it in a clean, dry place (wrapped in a clean towel) until you use it again.
- Wash your hands after you put everything away.

Is bleeding or spotting normal?

Radiation may make the inside of your vagina thin and fragile. You may notice light bleeding (a teaspoon or less) after intercourse or when you use your dilator. This is normal. You can wear a panty liner.

If you have heavy bleeding or bleeding that will not stop, contact your healthcare team.

Is it safe to have intercourse during radiation treatment?

Intercourse is safe during your treatments if:

- You are not having problems with heavy bleeding or infection
- You have not had a hysterectomy (surgical removal of your uterus) in the last 6 weeks

Using a water-based lubricant during intercourse can increase your comfort and prevent tearing to the inside of your vagina. If you're unsure, speak to your cancer doctor about your concerns.

For More Information

Where do I go for more information or help?

The Oncology and Sexuality, Intimacy, and Survivorship program (OASIS) can help support people with cancer with sexual health concerns.

- Search 'Cancer and Sexuality' on MyHealthAB.ca or scan the QR code below with a smart phone camera to visit the web page. Discuss any of your concerns with your doctor.



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The information is to be updated every 3 years, or as new clinical evidence emerges. If there are any concerns or updates with this information, please email cancerpatienteducation@ahs.ca.



For your next appointment

- Bring this booklet
- Arrive 15 minutes early
- Bring a list of your medications
- Bring a list of questions

For other Cancer Care Alberta resources,
visit cancercarealberta.ca



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