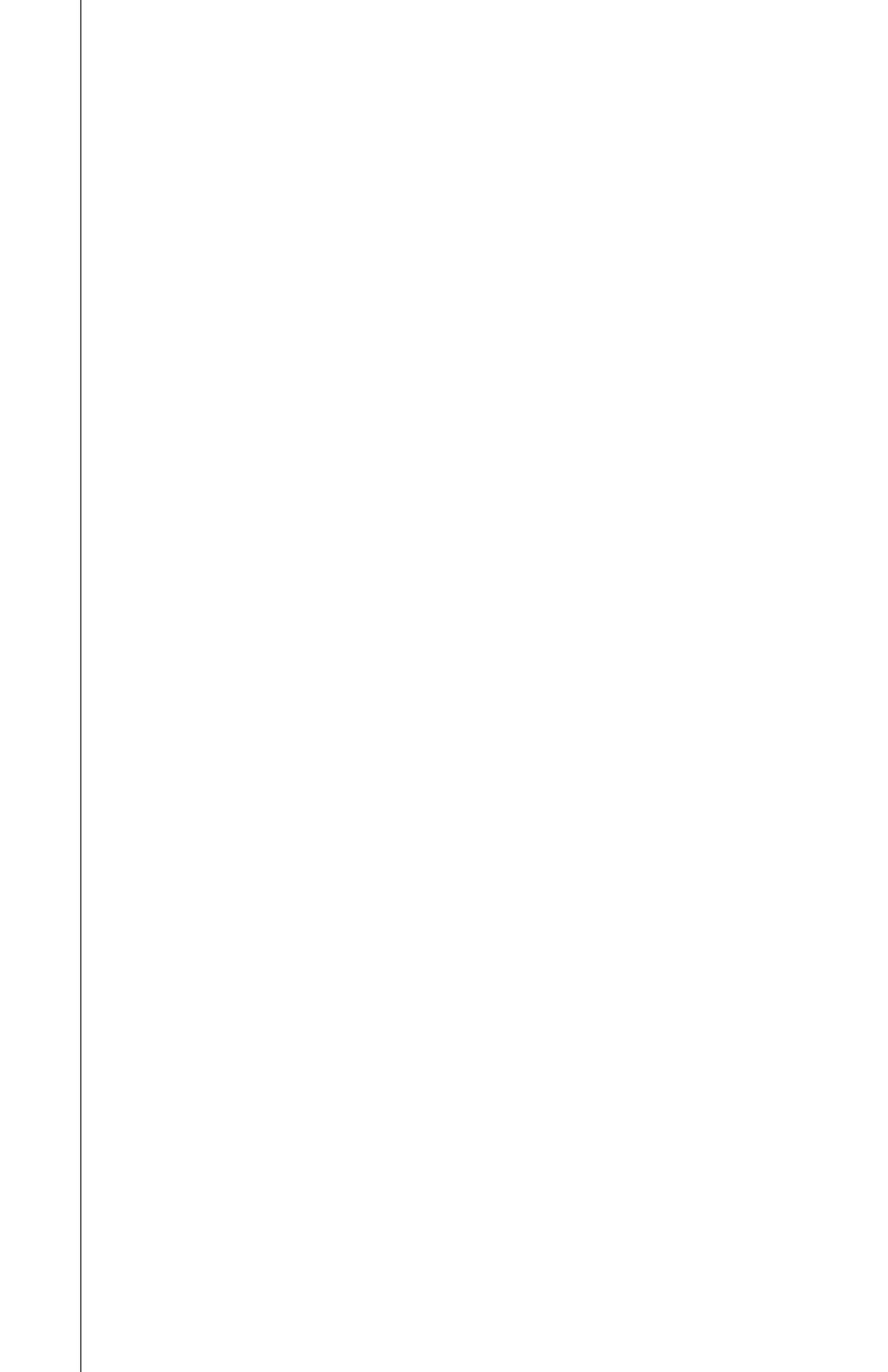


# **Using a Dilator**



**Alberta Health  
Services**

Tom Baker Cancer Centre



## **How will radiation affect my vagina?**

---

The radiation may cause swelling and redness inside and around your vagina and genitals during your treatment. These side effects may get worse in the 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 genital tissue may feel dry. Your vagina may also start to slowly narrow or shrink. The dryness and narrowing of your vagina may make it difficult to have pelvic exams, and you may find sexual intercourse painful. Even if you're not sexually active, you should still keep the flexibility of your vaginal tissue for your general comfort and for future pelvic examinations.

## **What can I do to reduce these effects?**

---

When your radiation treatments are finished, your radiation nurse will give you a dilator that you can use to stop your vagina from shrinking and/or narrowing. Sexual intercourse can also help to stretch your vagina.

## **When should I start using my dilator?**

---

Start using your dilator 4 to 8 weeks after your radiation treatment is finished. Use your dilator at least 3 times a week for 6 months, and once a week thereafter, as needed. When you use your dilator, you will find vaginal moisturizers and/or lubricants helpful. Please look at the "Choosing a Personal Lubricant" brochure for more information.

## **Why is it important to use the dilator?**

---

Using your dilator after treatment and adding it to your daily routine will help prevent scar tissue. The narrowing of your vagina can still happen over a period of years after your radiation treatments end. Because of this, your oncologist will talk to you about how long you should use the dilator.

## **How to use a dilator**

---

1. Wash your hands before getting these items:
  - Dilator
  - Lubricant
  - Towel
  - Pillows, blankets, or other things to help make you comfortable
2. Lie down in an area where you can have privacy, and/or invite your partner to help you, if you feel comfortable.
3. Lie on your back with your knees apart and your legs bent at a 90 degree angle, or in a position that you find comfortable. Make sure you can easily reach the opening of your vagina. Use a hand mirror if you need to.
4. Use your fingers to rub a **water-based** lubricant onto your **labia** (the skin folds around the opening of the vagina) and to the rounded end of the dilator.
5. 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.

6. 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, but tell your oncologist if you feel pain when you're using your dilator.

7. Once you have inserted the dilator:

- Do **pelvic floor** exercises - tense and release the muscles that you would use to stop your urine stream (Kegel exercises).
- Slowly move the dilator forward/backward and right/left (as much as is comfortable).
- Try to keep the dilator inserted for **about 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, and you can wear a panty liner. If you have persistent or heavy bleeding please call your oncologist or radiation therapy nurse.

### **Contact Names**

Doctor \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Radiation Therapy Nurse \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

## **When is it safe to have intercourse?**

---

Intercourse is safe during your treatment phase 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 vaginal water-based lubricant during intercourse can increase your comfort and prevent tearing to the inside of your vagina. If you're unsure, please speak to your oncologist about your concerns.

## **Vaginal moisturizers**

---

Vaginal moisturizers help relieve dryness all day, not just before and during intercourse. These products are often used for the rest of a woman's life, if needed. **Replens™** is a safe vaginal moisturizer that you can buy from any drugstore. Use as directed, or ask your oncologist if you are unsure.

## **Further support**

---

**Sexuality and Cancer** published by the Canadian is a good resource. You can get this booklet from the pamphlet racks at Tom Baker Cancer Centre and the Holy Cross Centre.

We also have specialists in Psychosocial Oncology who can help you deal with these issues. You can call them at 403-355-3207.

### **You can find more information about dilators and supplies online at:**

- [www.soulsource.com](http://www.soulsource.com)
- [www.vaginismus.com](http://www.vaginismus.com)
- [www.sexualityresources.com](http://www.sexualityresources.com)

