

Vaginal Dilation after Radiation

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Purpose: Following surgery and radiation to the pelvis, the vagina can develop scar tissue. If allowed to form, this scar tissue can narrow the vagina and alter the normal vaginal mucosa. This can make sexual intercourse and pelvic exams painful and challenging. Following cancer treatment in the pelvis, it is important for us to be able to perform good pelvic exams to monitor for a cancer recurrence. The routine use of vaginal dilators will prevent the formation of scar tissue in the vagina.

Scar tissue typically forms at the top of the vagina and often begins at the sides and works its way to the middle.

What are vaginal dilators?

Vaginal dilators are plastic rods of different sizes that you will place in the vagina to stretch the tissue. There are 5 different dilator sizes.

How do you use vaginal dilators?

1. Attach the handle to the dilator.
2. Place lubricant on the dilator
3. Insert the dilator into the vagina. Insert as far as possible without causing pain.
4. Once at the top of the vagina, move the dilator up and down and side to side.
5. Remove dilator and repeat steps 3 and 4.

Which dilator do you use?

1. Start with the smallest dilator or second smallest dilator. The correct dilator should go in without pain but should be stretching the tissues. Some discomfort is expected, but pain is not. For most women, the second smallest dilator is the correct dilator to start with.
2. Once your initial dilator becomes easier to use, try moving to the next dilator in size. If the larger dilator causes pain, return to the previous dilator size. You should increase dilator size slowly over weeks to months.
3. The largest dilator in the set is generally too large for most women and is not necessary to use.
4. Your goal should be to use the third smallest dilator by 6 months following radiation.

When do you use vaginal dilators?

1. For best results use dilators daily.
2. At minimum, use dilators 3 times per week

When to start using dilators?

Please start using dilators 1 month after completion of radiation therapy. This allows time for the tissues to heal prior to use.

TIPS:

1. Try using the dilators in the shower. Your tissues will be more relaxed and insertion will be easier.
2. Clean dilators with soap and water.
3. The dilator kit comes with lubricant, but any type of water-based lubricant is okay (if you prefer another brand).
4. Dilator insertion should take approximately 30 seconds. Simply insert, move from side to side and up and down. Then repeat one more time.

What to expect?

1. Dilator usage should get easier with time.
2. A small amount of vaginal bleeding during or after dilator use is expected. However, please discuss any vaginal bleeding with your physician.
3. Some discomfort with dilator use is normal and should decrease with usage.
4. Pain is not okay, so if you are experiencing pain, you should revert back to a smaller dilator and discuss this with your physician.

Discuss With Your Physician:

1. Vaginal discharge or odor: some white/yellow discharge can be normal, but please discuss any vaginal discharge with your physician.
2. As stated above, please make sure that you notify your physician of any vaginal bleeding and/or pain when using your dilators.