

## Vaginal Dilator Therapy: Instructions

**Why should I use my vaginal dilator?** After radiation therapy to the pelvis, there can be scarring of the vagina that in some cases results in permanent narrowing, shortening, or even complete closure of the vagina. Vaginal dilators stretch the vagina to keep it flexible and help to separate scar bands that could become permanent if not periodically removed. *Preventing vaginal narrowing is important for both your sexual health and for allowing your doctor to perform thorough pelvic exams in a way that is most comfortable for you.* Vaginal scarring can continue to happen months to years after radiation, so vaginal dilator therapy is a resource you should use throughout your life. *It is helpful to use a dilator even if you are having vaginal sexual intercourse.* Vaginal dilators help to:

- Prevent your vagina from becoming too narrow and short
- Allow your doctor to perform thorough pelvic exams (important for cancer surveillance)
- Make it more comfortable for you to be examined by your doctor
- Allow you to have vaginal sex as comfortably as possible
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**What are vaginal dilators?** Vaginal dilators are most commonly made of rigid plastic or silicone and are available in increasing sizes. A plastic set will be provided for you when you finish your cancer treatment, but different kinds are also available for purchase. They are washable and reusable.

**When should I start using my vaginal dilator?** You can begin to use a vaginal dilator and resume sex 2 to 4 weeks after finishing radiation treatments (and 6 to 8 weeks after pelvic surgery, if applicable). Because radiation can make the vaginal tissue drier and more sensitive, it is important to keep vaginal tissue hydrated. Use plenty of lubrication with the dilator and/or during sexual activity (examples: Pjur, Astroglide, Good Clean Love, pure almond or coconut oil). If using a silicone dilator, be sure to use a water- or oil-based lubricant. A silicone-based lubricant will cause the surface of a silicone dilator to deteriorate. For rigid plastic dilators, any type of water, oil or silicone-based lubricants is fine.

In addition, vaginal moisturizers can be used to increase moisture to the vagina and vulva and decrease general discomfort. Moisturizers are inserted into the vagina with a small applicator and a pea-size amount can also be applied with your finger to the inner and outer folds of skin (labia) around the vagina. Most women find moisturizing 3 to 5 times weekly relieves symptoms (e.g: Replens™, Good,Clean,Love Moisturizing Gel, Hyalo-Gyn).

**Instructions:** Inserting a small vaginal dilator should not cause discomfort if you do it slowly and gradually. Start with the smallest size dilator in your set. You can increase the size over time, which will help you have vaginal sex and be examined by your doctor without discomfort.

1. Wash the dilator with hot, soapy water and rinse before use.
2. Lie down with your knees bent shoulder-width apart. Rest your feet comfortably on the bed or couch.
3. Apply lubricant to the rounded end of the dilator. Do not use Vaseline or petroleum jelly because these do not wash away easily and can increase your risk for vaginal infection and irritation.
4. Using gentle pressure, insert the round end of the dilator into your vagina as far as comfortably possible. The dilator should feel snug – there can be slight discomfort, but it should not be painful. **Never use force or cause pain.**
5. Withdraw the dilator, and then reinsert a few more times for about 5 minutes. Rotate the dilator gently in wide circles to stretch the width of your vagina.
6. Remove the dilator. Wash it after each use with hot, soapy water. Rinse well and dry.
7. Repeat these 1 to 3 times per week. **Regular use is key.** It is possible to have a small amount of bleeding when you use the dilator. If you notice frequent bleeding or a lot of bleeding (such as bleeding that soaks up a sanitary napkin), call your doctor. If you are prone to getting urinary tract infections, you should try to urinate after dilator therapy.

**When should I increase the size of my vaginal dilator?** When you can insert one size of a dilator to the top of your vagina without any discomfort, it is time for you to start using the next size up. The goal is to slowly increase the size of your dilators and reach the largest size for your body without discomfort.

If you have additional questions, please call your doctor or nurse, who will further help you.