

## Follow-up care after gynaecological brachytherapy



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**Brachytherapy Treatment Program**

## Follow-up care after gynaecological brachytherapy

Radiation therapy to the pelvis can cause changes in the vagina, such as dryness, shortening and/or narrowing. This can make having sexual intercourse and pelvic exams difficult and uncomfortable.

### Vaginal dilators

A vaginal dilator is a smooth plastic cylinder with a rounded end, similar to a tampon. It is about six inches in length and comes in different widths. Using a vaginal dilator can prevent and reverse the vaginal shrinkage that occurs as a result of radiation treatment.

### Using a dilator

- You can start using the dilator two weeks after your last radiation treatment as long as vaginal irritation has decreased.
- A vaginal dilator should be used once a day until your first follow-up appointment.
- Your oncologist may recommend that you continue using the dilator two to three times per week for life.
- On the days that you have sexual intercourse, you do not need to use the dilator.

### How to use the dilator

- Wash your hands.
- Lubricate the dilator with **water-soluble gel** (K-Y Jelly, Astroglide). *Do not use Vaseline or oil to lubricate the dilator, as it may cause infection.*
- Lie down on your bed at a time when you know you will have at least 15 minutes of privacy. Lay on your back with your knees bent and slightly apart. You may also lie in a bathtub of lukewarm water.
- Relax the muscles of the pelvic floor. You may try a couple of squeezes (like you are trying to stop urine flow) and then allow those muscles to relax.
- Gently and slowly slip the dilator into your vagina. If your vagina feels tight, hold the dilator in place while you squeeze and relax your vaginal muscles.
- When your vagina muscles relax push the dilator farther in. You may need to repeat the squeezing and relaxing a few times before the dilator is fully inserted.

- Hold the dilator in place for 10 minutes applying gentle pressure and keeping muscles relaxed. Some women find it difficult to hold the dilator in place, so roll up a towel and place it against the outside of the dilator and close your legs to hold it in place.
- Wash the dilator with warm water and soap and rinse well after.

### What to expect

It may take 8 to 12 weeks to feel an increase in the size of the vaginal opening and a softening of the tissues. Be patient. You may find that your emotions are somewhat sensitive as you begin this process. It may help to talk to your doctor, nurse or therapist. For most women, there is a period of adjustment, and then using the dilator becomes more routine.

Again, feel free to talk to your health care team if you are having difficulty. They are there to help you.

At first you may have a small amount of bleeding or spotting. This is normal and should stop as the vagina begins to stretch. The spotting may also continue after using the dilator and after intercourse for a couple of months. Heavy bleeding or increased pain is not normal and you should contact your doctor if you experience this.

### Call your physician if you have signs of an infection such as:

- Vaginal itching
- Fever
- Vaginal discharge with strong odour
- Abdominal pain

### Resuming sexual intercourse

You can resume sexual intercourse two weeks after your radiation ends. Regular sexual intercourse, about two to three days per week, can also help to prevent vaginal shrinkage. On the days you have sexual intercourse, you do not need to use the dilator. If you do not have intercourse, you will need to use the dilator two to three times a week.