

# Vaginal Rehabilitation After Radiation Therapy

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## **What is vaginal dilation?**

Radiation therapy to female pelvic organs may cause vaginal changes including vaginal dryness, narrowing and shortening due to radiation scarring. These changes may lead to difficulty with sexual intercourse and pelvic examinations during your follow-up visits.

Dilation of the vagina after radiation therapy is recommended to prevent or treat these vaginal changes. Start vaginal dilation 6–8 weeks after completing radiation therapy. Vaginal dilators (small, medium, large) are available at the radiation oncology clinic. Other types of dilators are also available (see Table 1).

We recommend vaginal dilation 2–3 times a week (every 2–3 days). Start vaginal dilation with a small size and gradually increase the size as you feel comfortable. Sexual intercourse also helps with vaginal dilating. You may continue to dilate for 2 years; your provider will recommend whether you need to continue dilating or not, based on your pelvic exam at your 2-year visit.

## **What do I need for dilating?**

- Dilator
- Lubricant (See Table 2)
- Towel
- Pillow or cushion

## **How do I use a dilator?**

1. Wash your hands.
2. Lie down on a flat, comfortable surface. Place the towel underneath your hips. Bend your knees and spread your legs. Place pillows under your knees for comfort.
3. Apply lubricant to the dilator.
4. Gently insert the dilator into the vagina vault until you feel resistance.
5. Once the dilator reaches the top of the vagina — at a comfortable point, gently rotate it and then maintain the pressure for 10 minutes.
6. After removing the dilator, wash the dilator with mild soap and water, dry the dilator, and place the dilator in a zip loc bag until the next use.
7. Wash your hands.

## **When should I call my doctor?**

A small amount of bleeding or spotting after using a dilator is normal. If the bleeding does not stop after using the dilator or if new bleeding or pain occurs, please contact your provider.

## **What are vaginal moisturizers?**

Use vaginal moisturizers if you have vaginal dryness, which often causes pain during vaginal dilating. Vaginal moisturizers are products intended to ease vaginal dryness. To maintain moisture, use these products regularly (up to three times a week).

Vaginal moisturizers are absorbed into the skin, increasing moisture in the affected area. Moisturizers may not provide enough comfort during intercourse, so lubricants may still be needed.

One of the downsides of vaginal moisturizers is that they are messy. Because the vagina absorbs what it needs and excretes the rest, wear a panty-liner to catch the remaining moisturizer. (For a list of moisturizers, see Table 4.)

### Who should I call if I have questions?

- Call the **Radiation Oncology Department** at **(734) 936-4300**
  - Monday - Friday between 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
- Call the **Paging Operator** at **(734) 936-6267**
  - On weekends, holidays or after 5:00 p.m. on weekdays
  - Ask to have the **On-Call Radiation Oncology Resident** paged.

**Table 1. Dilators**

Vaginismus <a href="https://vaginismus.com/">https://vaginismus.com/</a>	Offers reasonable priced set of 6 hard plastic dilators in graduated sizes with attachable handle for ease of insertion.
Pure Romance <a href="https://www.pureromance.com">https://www.pureromance.com</a>	Offers flexible dilator sets in various sizes.
CooperSurgical <a href="https://www.coopersurgical.com">https://www.coopersurgical.com</a>	Milex dilators are flexible, silicone dilators in graduated sizes.
CMT (Current Medical Technologies) <a href="https://www.cmtmedical.com/">https://www.cmtmedical.com/</a>	Syracuse Medical Devices vaginal dilators are medical grade, non-latex, rigid plastic dilators. Seven graduated sizes are available.

**Table 2. Common Lubricant**

Astroglide® and Astroglide Glycerin and Paraben Free®	<p>Is a long-lasting light lubricant that is odorless and flavorless. It is water soluble. Many like it because it is long-lasting and it does not become “stringy”. Found at local grocery and drug stores.</p> <p>Astroglide® also comes glycerin and paraben free (Astroglide Glycerin and Paraben Free®).</p>
I-D Millennium®	<p>Is a silicone lubricant. Water-proof. Very slippery in texture. Can also be used as massage oil.</p>
K-Y Jelly®	<p>Is considered an all-purpose lubricant that many people have found helpful with a “medium” degree of thickness. Others say it dries out too fast and gets “gummy”. Contains glycerin.</p>
KY Gel®	<p>Is preferred by some as less sticky than K-Y Jelly. Contains sorbitol, a sugar alcohol.</p>
Liquid Silk®	<p>Is glycerin-free and odorless. It has a lotion-like feel. Can be used as a moisturizer.</p>
Lubrin®	<p>Is a suppository that many post-menopausal women find to be a helpful lubricant because it is inserted into the vagina. Some women say it is almost too much lubricant.</p>
Maximus®	<p>Is thick in texture like a lotion. Natural feeling and long lasting.</p>
Pre-Seed®	<p>Fertility-friendly lubricant. Glycerin-free. Will not limit or harm sperm. Recommended by fertility experts.</p>

Probe Silky Light®	Is gentle and paraben-free. This is a good lubricant for those who have sensitivities.
Slippery Stuff Gel®	Is a glycerin-free, flavorless, thicker lubricant.
Sliquid®	Silicone, water-based varieties and hybrids. No glycerin or parabens.
Surgilube®	Water soluble, contains propylene glycol, and is latex compatible.
Sylk®	Plant-based, pH balanced. Safe to use with condoms. Paraben free.

**Table 3. Hypoallergenic lubricants – organic and chemical free**

Pink®	Made with water and aloe extract, washes off easily. Glycerin and paraben free, good slipperiness. Can also be used as a moisturizer.
Just Like Me®	Made by Pure Romance, pH balanced, safe for latex condoms.
Good Clean Love® (Almost Naked)	Certified organic, paraben and glycerin-free. Advertises as carbon neutral.

**Table 4. Moisturizers**

Extra Virgin Olive Oil (natural)	<p>Can be used as a moisturizer by placing on finger and rubbing into the vaginal canal. Do not use other food oils as they can trap bacteria.</p> <p><b>DO NOT</b> use with latex condoms as they weaken the condom, cause tears, and can cause disintegration of the condom.</p>
Vitamin E Oil (natural)	<p>Can be used as a suppository. Pure vitamin E oil is available in bottle form or capsule form. If you use the capsules, break them open and apply to the vaginal canal. You can apply vitamin E oil one or more times a day.</p> <p><b>DO NOT</b> use with latex condoms as they weaken the condom, cause tears, and can cause disintegration of the condom.</p>
Coconut Oil (natural)	<p>Coconut oil can be used on the outside of the vaginal entrance and just inside the edge. Coconut oil is good for rejuvenating dry, irritated tissues and for keeping vaginal dryness at bay. Coconut oil should be pure, without other oils or additives.</p> <p><b>DO NOT</b> use with latex condoms as they weaken the condom, cause tears, and can cause disintegration of the condom.</p>
<p><b>IF</b> you are prone to urinary tract infections, yeast infections, or have diabetes, you may not be able to use natural oils.</p>	
Luvena®	<p>A vaginal moisturizer that can be found at your local drug store. It is hormone, glycerin and paraben free.</p>

Replens®	<p>Estrogen free. Good for post-menopause or after medical treatments (such as chemotherapy and hormone therapy) that dry the vagina. This moisturizer is inserted into the vagina with an applicator 1-3 times per week.</p> <p>Women who choose not to use or cannot use localized estrogen replacement to the vagina often use Replens.</p>
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Author: Heejin (Jinny) Kim, DNP, AGPCNP-BC, AOCNP

Reviewers: Jolly, Shruti, MD

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