

Vaginal Dilation After Radiation

Radiation treatments for women's cancers can make the vagina shrink and dry out. This makes it hard for doctors to do follow-up exams. Gentle stretching can help prevent the shrinkage. You need to stretch the vagina two or three times each week.

Sexual Intercourse

Having sex is one way to stretch the vagina. You can start having sex again when it is comfortable for you. This is usually about 2–3 weeks after you finish radiation therapy. Your vagina may be dry or tender. Using a water-based lubricating jelly can help.

Using a dilator. If sexual relations are not frequent for you, your radiation team will give you a vaginal dilator. You can begin using it about two weeks after you finish radiation treatment. Follow these steps each time you use the dilator:

1. Wash the dilator with hot, soapy water. Rinse it well.
2. Lie on your back with your knees bent and apart.
3. Put water-soluble lubricating jelly on the round end of the dilator. Do not use oil-based lubricants.
4. Separate your labia. With firm, gentle pressure put the rounded end into your vagina as far as it will go. Do not force the dilator.
5. Leave the dilator in place for 2–3 minutes and then remove it. Repeat steps 4 and 5 two more times.
6. Wash the dilator again with hot, soapy water and rinse it well when you are finished.

If you have concerns, talk with your cancer care team.

Helpful Resources

Cancer and its treatments often decrease interest in sex during or after treatment due to fatigue, stress, anxiety, and physical changes. These changes may also affect how you feel about your body now and in the future. Our Patient and Family Support social workers can talk about and work through issues—with patients on their own or with their partners. Social workers can help in many ways:

- Increase your confidence and hopefulness
- Connect you to helpful information and resources
- Address body image and self-esteem concerns
- Explore emotional impacts of cancer and treatment

For more information, ask your doctor or nurse to contact the social worker on your health care team, or visit www.huntsmancancer.org/sexual-health.