



How to Manage Vaginal Stenosis

Princess Margaret

For women who have had cancer treatment

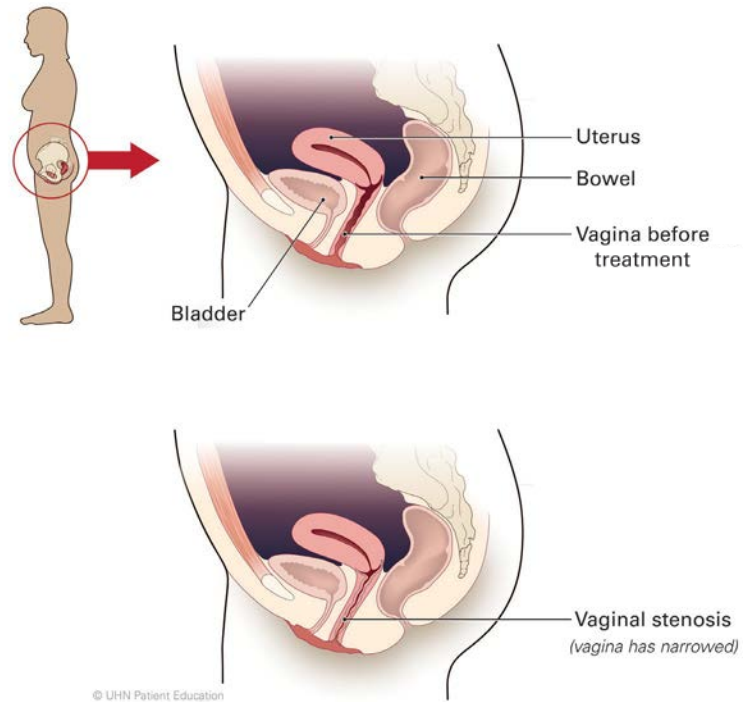
Read this resource to learn about:

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About vaginal stenosis

What is vaginal stenosis?

- Vaginal stenosis (pronounced stuh-no-sis) is when the vagina becomes narrow.
- This may be caused by radiation treatment to the pelvis or from surgery to treat your cancer.
- Chemotherapy treatments can also make vaginal stenosis worse.



Why is it important to manage vaginal stenosis?

It is important to keep your vagina open. This means keeping it from getting too narrow. An open vagina will make medical pelvic exams and vaginal sex more comfortable.

This is an important part of your health. If it is left untreated, vaginal stenosis can lead to:

- long-term problems with sexual intercourse
- pain during medical pelvic exams.

Even if you are not thinking of having vaginal sex right now, it is important to help keep your vagina open.

What can I do to help keep my vagina open if I have vaginal stenosis?

If you have vaginal stenosis, it is important to start using a vaginal dilator after your cancer treatments have finished.

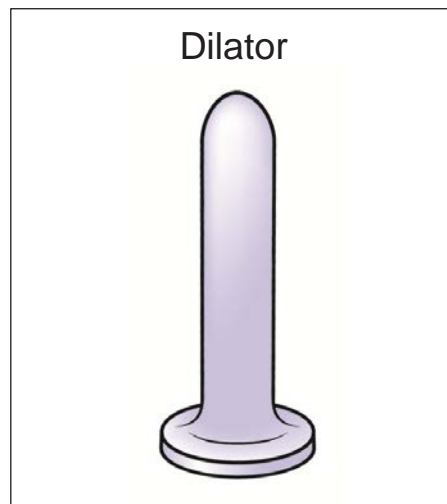
A vaginal dilator is a device that is placed inside the vagina to help keep the vagina open.

Vaginal dilators come in many sizes and are often sold as sets. They can be made of plastic, silicone or wax.

Using a dilator will also help:

- break down scar tissue from cancer treatments
- stretch the walls of the vagina to keep it more open

Read the next section to learn how to use a vaginal dilator.



How to use a vaginal dilator

When should I start using a vaginal dilator?

Start using the dilator 2 to 3 weeks after you have finished radiation treatment. You can still use the dilator if you are getting chemotherapy.

How often should I use the dilator?

Use your dilator 3 times every week to help keep your vagina open.

If you are having vaginal sex with your partner, you can replace using the dilator with sex. For example, if you have vaginal sex 2 times in a week, you will only need to use the dilator 1 time in a week.

It can be hard to remember to use your dilator each week. Try to make using your dilator a part of your normal routine. For example, you can use your dilator:

- in bed before you go to sleep
- in bed before you get up in the morning

When can I stop using the dilator?

Use the dilator for at least 6 months after your cancer treatment ends.

After 6 months, talk to your healthcare provider about the right time to stop using your dilator. You will likely be ready to stop if:

- you are able to have vaginal sex without pain
- you are able to get a medical pelvic exam without too much discomfort

What will I need before I start?

You will need:

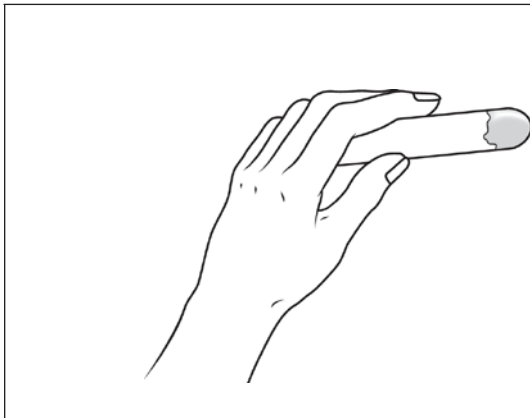
- vaginal dilator (if you have a set of dilators, start with the smallest dilator in your set)
- water-based vaginal lubricant (also known as “lube”)
- 15 to 20 minutes of alone time

Use your vaginal dilator with a water-based vaginal lubricant. A product example of a water-based lubricant is KY Jelly®.

Do not use Vaseline® or a silicone-based lubricant. These products will damage the dilator.

Read the pamphlet called “For women and their sexual partners: Vaginal moisturizers and lubricants” to learn more about vaginal lubricants and moisturizers.

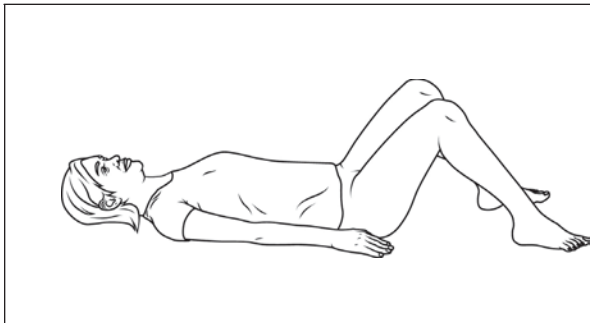
What do I need to do?



Step 1.

Cover the rounded end of the dilator with lubricant. Use a drop of lubricant about the size of a quarter, or more if needed.

Then apply lubricant to your vaginal opening.

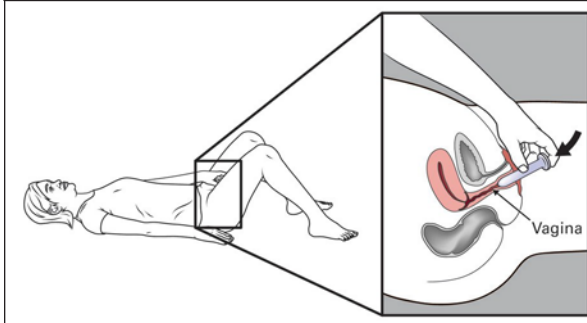


Step 2.

on your back on a comfortable surface.

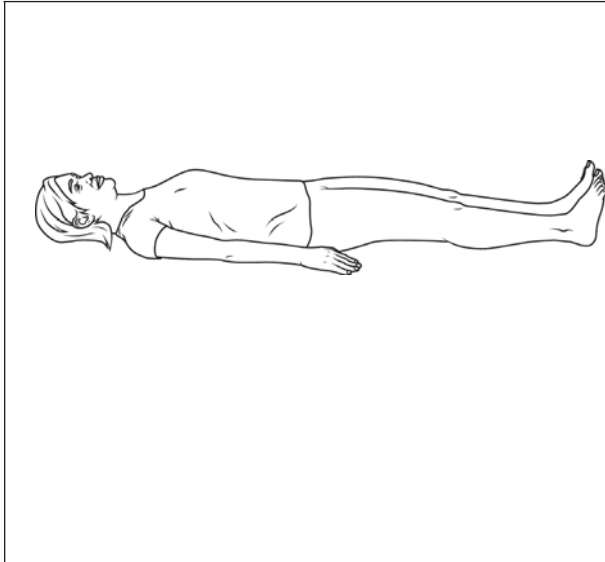
Step 3.

Bend your knees and spread your legs about shoulder-width apart.



Step 4.

Insert the dilator into your vagina. Gently slide it in as far as it will go. Do not worry if you cannot insert the dilator all the way in right away

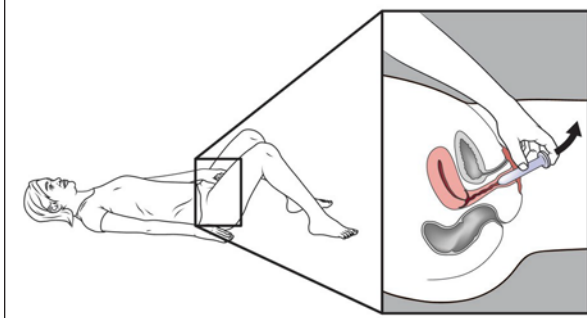


Step 5.

With the dilator inside you, slowly close and straighten your legs. You can let go of the dilator when you are in this position.

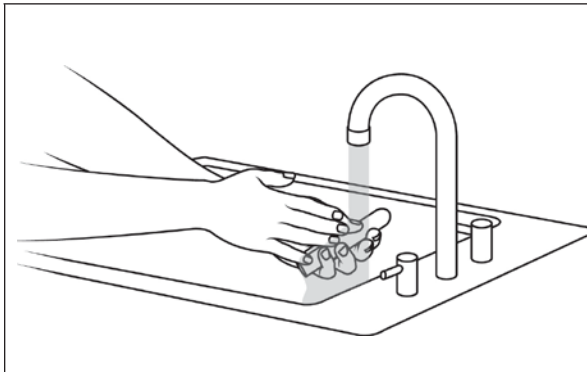
Step 6.

Stay in this position for 3 minutes. As this gets easier, you can increase the time that the dilator is in you to up to 10 minutes.



Step 7.

Gently slide the dilator out. There may be a small amount of bright red blood. This is normal.



Step 8.

Wash the dilator with soap and water after each use. Rinse it well.

Step 9.

Air dry the dilator and keep it in a dry place.

When you are able to do steps 1 to 9 above without pain or trouble, move up to the next size dilator in your set.

What should I do if I have trouble inserting my dilator?

Try these tips to help make it easier:

- Use your dilator after a warm bath. This may help to relax the muscles around the opening of your vagina making it easier to insert the dilator.
- Do a few pelvic floor (kegel) exercises before trying to insert the dilator. Insert the dilator while you are relaxing the pelvic floor muscles. Read the pamphlet called "Pelvic floor (kegel) exercises for women" to learn how to do these exercises.
- Use a mirror to help guide you.
- Take some deep breaths and try again later. It will get easier with practice.

If you still have trouble inserting the dilator into your vagina, talk to your doctor or nurse. Sometimes, overly tight muscles around the vagina may be making it hard to use a dilator. If this is the case, ask your health care team if a referral to a pelvic health physiotherapist may be helpful.

See page 10 for more information about how to find a pelvic health physiotherapist near you.

When to get medical help

Dilators are safe to use. But, it is important to make sure they are cleaned well before you use them to prevent infection.

Get medical help if you notice any of these signs:



- heavy bleeding from your vagina (like a period)
- a lot of pain in your abdomen (belly area)
- pain when you urinate
- needing to urinate all the time
- blood in your urine
- blood in your bowel movement

If you still visit the hospital often, call your chemotherapy or radiation doctor or nurse.

If you no longer visit the hospital, call your family doctor.

If any of these happen at night or on a weekend, go to the closest hospital Emergency Department.

Where to find more information

Where can I get more information?

If you have any questions about how to use the dilator please call:

- The Radiation Treatment Department at 416-946-4501, extension 4642
or
- The Cancer Survivorship Clinic at 416-946-4501, extension 2363

Where can I get a vaginal dilator?

If you have vaginal stenosis, a member of your healthcare team will give you a dilator. You will get one at either:

- the end of your radiation treatment
or
- at your first follow-up appointment

A member of your health care team will also provide you with one-on-one instruction on how to use your dilator.

If your health care team does not talk to you about vaginal stenosis, ask them about whether or not you have vaginal stenosis and if you should start using a dilator.

You can also buy vaginal dilators at:

Vaginismus

Website: www.vaginismus.com
Email: help@vaginismus.com
Phone: 1-888-426-9900

Come As You Are

Address: 493 Queen St. West, Toronto ON
Website: www.comeasyouare.com
Email: info@comeasyouare.com
Phone: 416-504-7934

Good For Her

Address: 175 Harbord St., Toronto, ON
Website: www.goodforher.com
Phone: 416-588-0900

Some extended health insurance providers will cover the costs of vaginal dilators. Check with your insurance provider for more information.

Where can I find a pelvic health physiotherapist?

A pelvic health physiotherapist is an expert in assessing and treating conditions caused by pelvic floor muscles that do not work well. If you are having pain with vaginal sex or with medical exams because of vaginal stenosis, a pelvic health physiotherapist can teach you how to use a dilator and relax tight pelvic floor muscles.

Contact these places to find a pelvic health physiotherapist in your area.

College of Physiotherapists of Ontario

375 University Avenue, Suite 901
Toronto, Ontario, M5G 2J5

Website: www.collegept.org
Email: info@collegept.org
Phone: 1-800-583-5885

Pelvic Health Solutions

Website: www.pelvichealthsolutions.ca
Visit the website to find a physiotherapist near you.

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