

How to Manage Vaginal Stenosis

For people who have had cancer treatment

Read this resource to learn about:

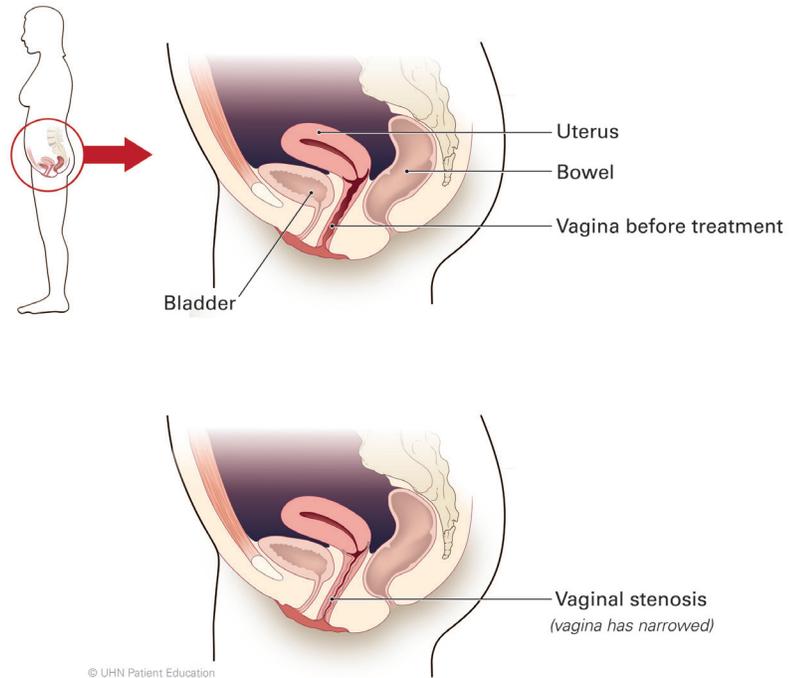
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About vaginal stenosis

What is vaginal stenosis?

- Vaginal stenosis is when scar tissue begins to form in the vagina. Scarring causes the vagina to become narrower and shorter.
- Vaginal stenosis 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?

Vaginal stenosis is a long-term side effect of your cancer treatment. It can occur months after your treatment is finished.

If you develop vaginal stenosis, it will be hard for your doctor to do vaginal exams. Vaginal exams are an important part of your follow-up care.

A vaginal exam allows your doctor to:

- detect cancer recurrence (when the same type of cancer comes back) as early as possible
- find any new cancer as early as possible
- see how well treatment has worked
- help manage any side effects after treatment

Vaginal stenosis can also make sexual activity and vaginal penetration painful and uncomfortable.

Even if you are not thinking of having sex with vaginal penetration right now, it is important to help keep your vagina open so your doctor can do vaginal exams. Vaginal penetration is putting something in your vagina, for example, a penis or finger.

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

As a patient at Princess Margaret Cancer Centre, you will get a dilator at the end of your radiation treatment. If you do not want to use the dilator we provide you, you can buy your own. See the section “Where to find more information”.

To prevent or reduce vaginal stenosis, start using the dilator after your cancer treatments have finished. Your health care team will let you know when you can start.

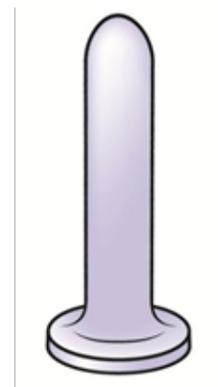
A dilator is a smooth tube made of plastic, rubber or silicone. A dilator is a medical device that is placed inside the vagina to help keep the vagina open.

Dilators come in many sizes and are often sold as sets.

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 dilator.



dilator

How to use a vaginal dilator

When should I start using a 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 sex with vaginal penetration, you can replace using the dilator with sex. For example, if you have 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 0 to 12 months after your cancer treatment ends.

After 12 months, talk to your health care provider about the right time to stop using your dilator. You will likely be ready to stop if:

- you are able to have sex with vaginal penetration 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:

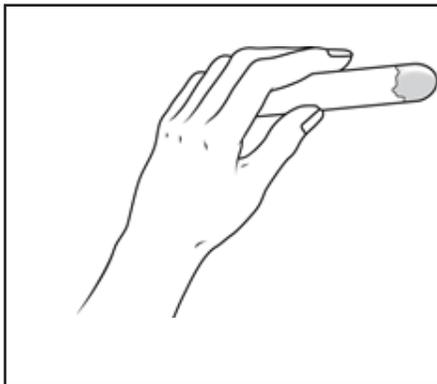
- a dilator
- water-based vaginal lubricant (also known as “lube”)
- 15 to 20 minutes of alone time

Use your 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 “Know How to Use Vaginal Moisturizers and Lubricants” to learn more about vaginal lubricants and moisturizers.

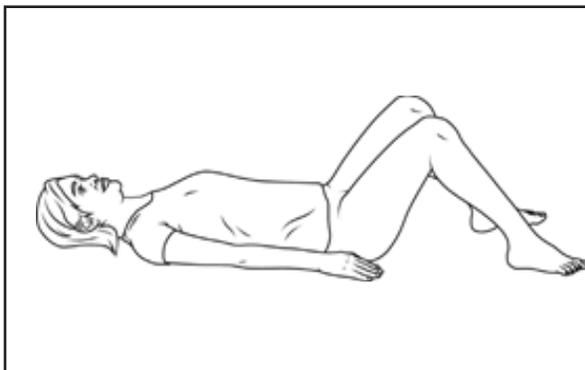
What do I need to do?



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.

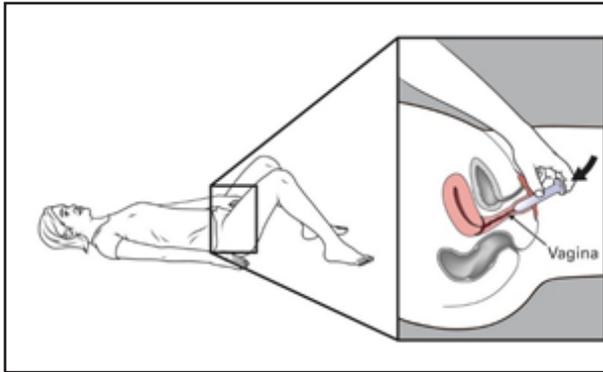


Step 2.

Lie on your back on a comfortable surface.

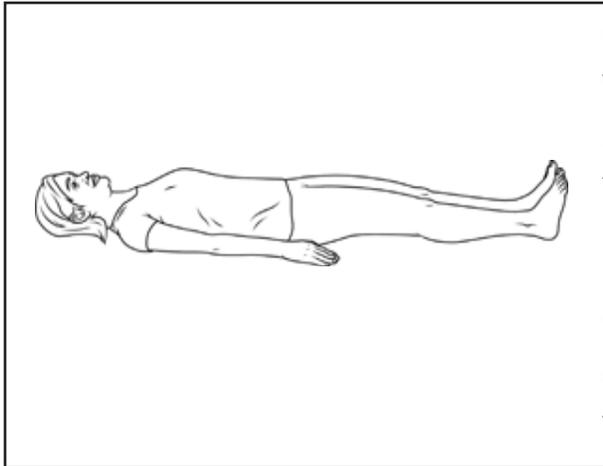
Step 3.

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.

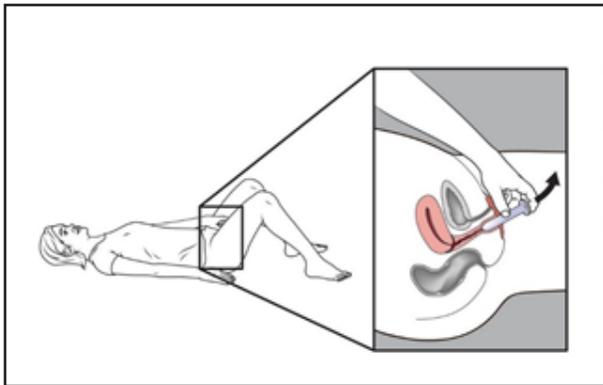


Step 5.

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

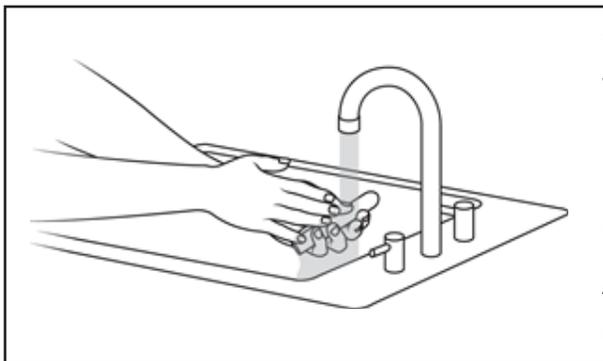
Step 6.

Stay in this position for 5 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.

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" 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 have trouble reaching to insert the dilator, prop up your back with pillow to help you curve forward.

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 (pee)
- needing to urinate all the time
- blood in your urine
- blood in your stool (poo)

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 dilator?

If you have vaginal stenosis, a member of your health care 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 dilators at:

Vaginismus

Website: www.vaginismus.com

Email: help@vaginismus.com | Phone: 1 888 426 9900

Come As You Are

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 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 when you have sex with vaginal penetration 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.

The development of patient education resources is supported by the Princess Margaret Cancer Foundation.



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