This leaflet is written for women who have been given a pack of vaginal dilators to help prevent scarring and narrowing in their vagina which can be caused by radiation.

This leaflet is detailed, but is intended as a guide only. A member of the treatment team will have already talked to you about using the dilators.

**Introduction**

Radiation treatment to the pelvis can often cause the vagina to become sore and inflamed. Once this reduces, during the healing process, scars can begin to develop causing shortening and tightening of the vagina. This can then lead to problems when the doctor needs to do an internal examination and also with sexual intercourse.

The treatment can also affect the cells that produce the natural vaginal lubricant causing a ‘dry’ or uncomfortable sensation.

These problems can occur from just a few weeks up to many months after your treatment.

By using the dilators regularly you will be able to minimise your risk of developing the scar tissue.

We recommend that you use them regularly whether or not you are engaging in regular sexual intercourse.
# How to use

1. Make sure you are able to relax, without being disturbed. Relaxing music may help.

2. Find a comfortable position – lying on the bed, lying in a warm bath, standing with one leg raised (foot supported) or standing in the shower (as long as you are stable).

3. Apply lubricant on the rounded end of the dilator and also around the entrance to the vagina.

4. Very gently insert the dilator into the vagina, do not apply any pressure or undue force. As you become more confident and relax, the dilator will probably go in a little further – but do not force it.

5. Gently turn the dilator, so that the tip moves in a circle, gently stretching the top of the vagina. Change the direction of movement.

6. Repeat each of these movements five to ten times, gradually increasing the repetitions and length of time that you use them for.

7. Start with the smallest sized dilator and once you feel confident with that move to the next size. The two largest sizes should not be used if they feel uncomfortable.

8. If you are very anxious, when you use it for the first time, just insert the dilator leave for a few seconds and then remove. This should help increase your confidence.
When to use

This is a general guide only. Please follow the advice of the treatment team member who provided you with the dilators.

1. Two to three weeks after your treatment has finished start to use the smallest dilator for very short periods of time one to two minutes only.

2. Once you are familiar and confident with the dilators start to increase the time you use them for.

3. By four to five weeks after the treatment has finished you should be using your dilators for:–

   **five minutes three times a week**

If you follow these instructions, or the verbal advice, you cannot damage yourself with the dilators. Do not be alarmed if you experience slight vaginal bleeding when you first start to use them, this will gradually lessen with continued use.

If bleeding becomes severe, or you notice an abnormal discharge, do not hesitate to contact the treatment team or your family doctor.

Cleaning the dilators

Wash in soapy water and rinse thoroughly before and after each use. They do not need to be sterilised. When not using, keep in the case provided.

How long to use them

As the effects of the treatment can develop over many months it is currently recommended that using the dilators is for an indefinite period of time. You can discuss this with the team caring for you at follow-up appointments.
Sexual intercourse

As long as it is comfortable for you, it is OK to continue with sexual intercourse during your treatment. But you will still need to use the dilators as well.

If you would like a copy of the information leaflet ‘Sexuality and Cancer’ please ask a member of the treatment team.

Lubricants

The radiation treatment will make your vagina sore and can dry up the cells that produce natural lubricant. Therefore we advise that you use a lubricant when using your dilators to help minimise any discomfort.

You may have been given some samples to try; they are all non-hormonal and can be used during and after radiation treatment. We do not advise one product over another, it is down to personal preference on which one you prefer to use. They can also be used for sexual intercourse.

There are other lubricants available in high street shops and over the internet. It is advised not to use lubricants with extra stimulants (warming, tingling sensations) during your radiation treatment or for a few weeks after completing the treatment.

If any lubricant causes irritation discontinue use and consult your family doctor if the symptoms persist.

Petroleum jelly (Vaseline) in not recommended as a vaginal lubricant.
If you have any questions regarding your dilators either during your treatment, or after it has finished please do not hesitate to contact the person who gave them to you or your gynaecological oncology nurse practitioner.

Name ........................................................................................................................................

Contact Number .....................................................................................................................
If you need an interpreter or need a document in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call 01865 221473 or email PALSJR@ouh.nhs.uk

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Review May 2015
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OMI 4525P