

# **Advice to Patients Following Radiotherapy for a Gynaecological Cancer**





You have completed your course of radiotherapy to the pelvis for gynaecological cancer. We hope this leaflet answers some of the questions you may have about resuming sexual activity. This information should be taken as a general guide. Further individual aspects will be discussed with your clinical nurse specialist or doctor.

Radiotherapy can cause your vagina to become narrower, shorter, less elastic and a bit more sensitive or sore. In addition you will probably find that the skin on the inside and outside is a bit drier. This can make your medical examination and sexual intercourse very difficult. It is therefore important your vagina is kept as supple as possible. Hormone creams and lubricants can be helpful but regular intercourse and/or the use of a vaginal dilator after treatment is the most effective way of preventing narrowing of your vagina. Hormone creams can only be prescribed by your doctor who will discuss this with you if appropriate.

This booklet explains these issues in a bit more detail.

## **What are vaginal dilators?**

In order to maintain the suppleness of your vagina some form of gentle stretching or dilatation is necessary. To help with this we advise the use of vaginal dilators.

The vaginal dilators are cone shaped plastic and come in a pack containing four different sizes. The pack will also contain guidance on how to use them and information on how to look after them.

Evidence for the best possible effect is that dilation is done for 5-10 minutes at least 3 times a week.

## **How do I use them?**

It is always best to use a lubricant when inserting the dilators. Choose a time of day that is most suitable, when you are most likely to have privacy. Choose a position that is comfortable for you, this may be lying down or standing up. Gently insert the dilator into your vagina by gently turning it clockwise and anticlockwise as far as is comfortable for you, without being painful. Once you have inserted the dilator, gently turn it in small circles. This helps to break down any adhesions that may have formed following your radiotherapy. Do this for approximately 5-10 minutes and then remove the dilator, using the same turning motion you used to insert it.

Repeat this as advised at least 3 times a week or as part of your daily routine. Start with size one (the smallest) for at least one week, then, change to the second size. By the time you are returning for your follow up appointment with the medical staff, you should be using the second size comfortably. Your internal examination should be comfortable if you are able to insert and rotate size two of the dilator. If you are having any difficulty using the dilators or getting to size two, then you can discuss this at your follow up appointment.

If you are planning to resume sexual intercourse with penetration, you will find it more comfortable if you are able to use the third size of dilator. However if you are experiencing any difficulty with this, then please speak with the relevant staff members listed below.

If it has been some time since your treatment ended, this process may take a little longer and may be more uncomfortable. If it is really painful or you are unable to insert the dilator please seek help from your clinical nurse specialist or doctor.

## **Is it safe to have intercourse?**

Sexual intercourse after treatment is perfectly safe for both you and your partner. You may find that your partner is reluctant to resume sexual activity due to fear of hurting you and may need a lot of reassurance from you. It can help if you both try to talk about how you are feeling. Perhaps let your partner read this leaflet or speak to a member of staff together.

It is quite natural to feel a little anxious about resuming sexual activity after your treatment. Try not to worry, you are not alone and many people tend to feel this way. Some common worries are:

- Causing damage to the vagina.
- Causing the cancer to come back.
- That your partner may 'catch cancer'.

Please talk to your doctor or nurse who will be able to reassure you. Feel free to talk about anything troubling you.

## **When should I begin to have intercourse or use the dilators?**

You should try to resume intercourse or begin to use the dilators as guided by your team after treatment has ended. This will depend on a number of individual medical issues such as where your tumour was and whether you had surgery. It may also depend on how well you have responded to your recent radiotherapy and how far into the healing process you are. If you are unsure about this, you will have a follow-up appointment scheduled approximately 6-8 weeks after treatment has ended. You can ask then about any worries you may have.

## **Is there anything I could do to make it more comfortable?**

Because of the radiotherapy, your vagina will be drier than before. Although this may improve with time, it is usually necessary to use a lubricating jelly. Your dilator pack comes with a brand called Sylk, and this is available on prescription once the initial bottle has finished. However there are several other brands available if you want to try them. It is a matter of finding the one that suits you best. Intercourse may be a little uncomfortable at first but you should soon be able to resume your usual sex life.

## **Will I notice anything unusual?**

To begin with you may notice a few spots of blood after intercourse or after using the dilators. This is usually due to some adhesions in the vagina (small areas where the walls of the vagina stick together) and should soon settle down. If you have any prolonged or heavy bleeding please tell your clinical nurse specialist or doctor.

## **Where can I get help?**

We appreciate this is a private and intimate subject and you may not find all the answers to your questions in this leaflet.

Please discuss any concerns with your doctor or nurse who will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Remember all our staff are here to help with any questions you may have. Further specialist help is available from nursing staff, our Specialist Radiographer, Clinical Nurse Specialist and Information and Support Radiographer. There is also access to a clinical psychologist and counsellor. Please ask staff to put you in touch if you feel you may benefit from any of these services.

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Review K. Graham September 2021  
QA approved by H. Reid September 2021

Review Date September 2023

**mi** • 245782 v4.0