How to find your pelvic floor muscles

Before you can exercise them you need to find your pelvic floor muscles because it is important to use the correct ones.

1. Try squeezing the muscles around your back passage, as if you are trying to stop passing wind
2. Next, try squeezing the muscles around your front passage, as if you are trying to stop passing urine
3. Now try squeezing the muscles around your front passage, vagina and back passage together, as if you are trying to stop passing urine and wind at the same time. While you are tightening these muscles, lift them up inside you.

Do not:
Squeeze your legs together, tighten your buttocks, hold your breathe or pull in your tummy as you are doing this. You should be able to exercise your pelvic floor muscles without anyone knowing you are doing it.

There are two types of pelvic floor exercises: slow exercises and quick exercises.

**Slow exercises** – tighten the muscles and count to five to start with, then relax. Repeat this at least 10 times. You can gradually increase the count to 10 as you become better at the exercise.

**Quick exercises** – tighten the muscles and hold them for 1 count only, repeat this up to 10 times. Try both of these exercises throughout the day.

Sexual intercourse after radiotherapy

You may be feeling anxious about starting to have sexual intercourse again. It is perfectly natural for you or your partner to have concerns and it may take a little while before you both feel comfortable enough to try. It is important to remember that having sexual intercourse will not make your cancer come back or damage your vagina.

Radiotherapy can cause your vagina to become drier and it will be tender and a bit sore for a few weeks after your treatment has finished. You may need to use a lubricating cream or gel because of the dryness.

You can use the gel that comes with your dilators (SYLK) or any water based lubricant such as KY jelly or Replens. These are generally available at most pharmacies. If the pharmacy does not stock the product, they should be able to order it in for you.

If you are having difficulties or concerns, please speak to one of the team at your next clinic appointment.

If you need more advice or help with any of the above you can contact:

**Consultant Radiographer:**
Phone 07825 119 326

**Clinical Nurse Specialist:**
Phone 0131 537 2975

They will talk over any concerns with you or refer you to a specialist service for further help and support.

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After radiotherapy to the pelvis

Radiotherapy to the pelvis causes changes to your vagina due to scarring. Your vagina may become shorter or narrower, causing it to feel tight and dry, even tender. In some cases it can close over completely. This can make sexual intercourse and internal examination difficult or painful for some women.

Using vaginal dilators regularly will help to prevent these problems. This leaflet explains how to use the dilators and talks about some of the personal issues that might be worrying you.

Vaginal dilators

Using vaginal dilators regularly will help to keep your vagina feeling supple. If you have an operation or injury to an arm or leg you might be given some physiotherapy exercises to do afterwards. Using the dilators is like physiotherapy for the muscles in your vagina.

It is important to remember that when you come to the follow-up clinic the doctor will give you an internal examination. This is the best way of checking that the cancer has not come back. If you do not use the vaginal dilators, the doctor might not be able to examine your vagina properly because it is too scarred from the treatment.

Start using the dilator two weeks after finishing all of your radiotherapy treatment. Any skin reaction you have had from the radiotherapy treatment will have settled by then.

Use the dilator three times a week for 5–10 minutes each time.

Find a quiet place where you feel relaxed. You can use your dilators in the bath or shower if you feel this gives you more privacy.

Your pack will contain:
- Four plastic dilators (different sizes)
- One plastic handle
- Lubricating gel
- One cleaning brush
- Manufacturers instructions.

Before using the dilators, wash them in warm soapy water then rinse and dry thoroughly, making sure that all traces of soap are removed to avoid irritation. Alternatively you can place the dilators in boiling water for five minutes.

Choose a comfortable position. This may be lying on your back with your knees slightly raised and apart, or standing with one leg raised on the side of the bath or bed – a bit like the position you might use for putting in a tampon.

- Use the smallest size of dilator to start with
- Attach the handle to the dilator
- Apply some of the lubricant to the dilator and to the opening to your vagina
- Insert the dilator into your vagina gently but firmly. Do not force the dilator but place it in as far as you can without feeling uncomfortable
- Once the dilator is inserted, move it gently:
  1. Backwards and forwards
  2. From right to left
  3. Rotate gently if you can manage this
- Continue these exercises for at least five minutes
- As you insert the dilator into your vagina, try some pelvic floor exercises at the same time (these are explained further on in this leaflet)
- Remove the dilator by rotating it slowly – clockwise and anti-clockwise
- Wash with warm soapy water and rinse thoroughly, or you can place it in boiling water for five minutes.

You might notice a small amount of bleeding or spotting when you use the dilator. Do not worry as this is quite normal after radiotherapy. If you have heavy bleeding or it is very painful, please contact us for advice.

If you start to use the dilator and find it a bit too tender or uncomfortable, leave it for a few days before trying again.

When you feel comfortable using the first size then you can move onto the next size. You can gradually increase the size of dilator over several weeks depending on how comfortable you feel with each one.

Continue to use the dilators indefinitely. If you are having regular sexual intercourse you may not need to use the dilators so often. We will see you regularly at the follow-up clinic and will advise you on how long you need to use them for.

Start using your dilators on or after:

Pelvic floor exercises

Pelvic floor exercises are a helpful way to strengthen the muscles in your pelvic floor after a course of radiotherapy. They can help with a number of side effects that some people experience such as:

- The need to pass urine immediately, without warning
- Urine leaking when you cough or laugh
- The need to empty your bowels immediately, without warning
- Preventing vaginal scarring.