

# Vaginal Dilation Information for Patients Receiving Treatment for Rectal Cancer

The following information is for people who have had radiation and chemotherapy, then surgery, and will then receive more chemotherapy.

Because you are being seen by more than one cancer doctor in different areas of the cancer program, the question of when you can start dilating may need to be brought up by you when you are at an appointment. We suggest taking this paper with you to your different doctor visits to remind you to talk about it.

## Once you have completed radiation

Once you have completed radiation treatment (which also means you have completed taking the Xeloda® chemotherapy), wait 2 weeks and then begin dilating.

You may dilate right up to the day of your surgery.

## Dilating after Surgery

Generally, you can begin dilating your vagina after surgery once you have been discharged from hospital, except:

- If you have had vaginal wall involvement
- Part of your vagina is removed during surgery
- You have had complications from the surgery

In these situations, do not begin dilating before you have had your follow-up visit with your surgeon (about 6-8 weeks after your surgery) and you get the OK from your surgeon to begin dilating.

While you are still in hospital after surgery, ask your surgeon if you can begin dilating once you are discharged from hospital, or if you need to wait until after your follow-up visit. If you forget to ask this while in hospital, call the surgeon's office and leave the question with the administrative assistant.

The doctor and nurse in radiation oncology department will not be able to direct you when to start dilating after surgery as they will not know the details of your surgery. If the doctor directs you not to begin dilating until after they have seen you in your follow visit, remember to ask them at your follow-up visit, when it is ok to begin dilating again.

People who have had vaginal wall involvement or part of their vagina has been removed will need to have ongoing vaginal exams with their surgeon in follow up visits. Even if you do not need vaginal exams for other reasons, or you do not plan to be sexually active, it is important to begin dilating your vagina once your surgeon says it is safe to do so. A vaginal exam is part of the ongoing monitoring of your rectal cancer.

## Dilating with Chemotherapy

Unless you are experiencing complications from surgery, or you have been told otherwise, you can dilate through your chemotherapy.

If your chemotherapy becomes delayed due to low blood counts or other complications, remind your chemo doctor or nurse practitioner that you are dilating. They may tell you to stop dilating until your chemo is finished and your counts have recovered (or you no longer have complications).

If you do need to stop dilating through chemotherapy because of low blood counts or a complication, your chemo doctor or nurse practitioner will tell you when it is safe to start dilating again.

For those of you who don't need a vaginal exam for rectal cancer monitoring, continue to have pelvic exams into the future unless you have been told otherwise.

Please take the time to watch the teaching video and read the booklet "Use of Vaginal Dilators Following Radiation Therapy to the Pelvis" to learn about this important part of your recovery.

To watch and listen to this teaching video, you can type this full link into your internet browser search bar:

- <https://vimeo.com/showcase/4902954/video/547927391>

This video is 41 minutes long. You can press pause to watch at your pace, take notes or replay it any time you need. As you are watching the video, write down any questions you have and bring them to your next appointment.

Please contact your radiation nurse or radiation therapist if you have trouble finding this video online. If you need this information in another language, please let us know and we will provide a translator.

If you are having trouble dilating (especially if it is after 8 weeks since finishing your radiation or more than 8 weeks since your surgery), need support, or can't find the right dilators or lubricants, contact the radiation nurse or radiation therapist in the radiation department where you received your treatment. You may need to leave a message and we will return your call as soon as possible.

To contact your radiation oncology team regarding questions about vaginal dilation,

- Halifax, please call **902-473-6067**
- Cape Breton, please call **902-567-8100**

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Please do not use perfumed products. Thank you!*

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The information is not intended to be and does not constitute health care or medical advice.

If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider. The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.