

## Managing Your Vaginal Symptoms

Your cancer and cancer treatment may cause physical symptoms affecting your sexual health. This may include vaginal dryness or tightness. This handout offers information on how you can manage these symptoms.

After menopause, your ovaries stop making Estradiol (estrogen hormone). This can also happen after pelvic surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation therapy treatments. Without this hormone, the lining of your vagina becomes thinner and the walls don't stretch as well. Your vagina can also be drier even when you are sexually aroused. These changes in your vagina can cause pain during sexual activity. If sexual activity is painful, you may develop a fear of pain with sexual activity. This may reduce your sexual desire (interest in participating in sexual activity).

### Managing vaginal dryness

There are options available to manage your vaginal dryness. Some help keep your vagina healthy after menopause and allow you to be comfortable with vaginal penetration (when something is put in your vagina). This also helps make future pelvic exams more comfortable.

#### A list of options available to manage your vaginal dryness

##### 1. Vitamin E

Break open a Vitamin E capsule and rub the oil outside and inside your vagina. Do this 1 time each day.

Do not use Vitamin E if you are having pelvic radiation or have vaginal infections often. You can begin to use Vitamin E 4 weeks after your pelvic radiation treatments are completed.

##### 2. Natural products

Natural products like olive oil, coconut oil, or almond oil can be rubbed outside and inside your vagina. You can make ovules (solid shape) of coconut oil by putting the oil into small chocolate molds and refrigerating. After the oil has become solid, insert into your vagina. Do this 1 time each day.

Do not use petroleum-based products such as Vaseline®, body lotion, or massage oils as they can:

- Lessen the protection provided by a condom.
- Damage sex toys.
- Increase your risk of getting a vaginal infection.

##### 3. Vaginal moisturizers

Moisturizers help keep the lining of your vagina moist, more elastic, and healthy. They also reduce your risk of vaginal infections. Your vagina will be less dry, less acidic, and have more stretch after regularly using a moisturizer for 12 weeks. Vaginal moisturizers come in gels, creams, or ovules. They are placed in your vagina using a tampon-shaped applicator or your finger.

How to use a vaginal moisturizer:

- Use a vaginal moisturizer 3 times a week. It takes up to 3 months for the moisturizer to be fully effective. Vaginal dryness can return if you stop using the moisturizer.
- Put the moisturizer into your vagina before bedtime. This can prevent it leaking out of your vagina. It can leak out when you are standing, sitting, or walking. Also rub some of the moisturizer on the outside of your vagina.
- Using a vaginal moisturizer can increase your vaginal discharge. This is because your vaginal walls are shedding old tissue. It is being replaced with new and healthier tissue. This discharge should decrease after you use the moisturizer for 2 weeks.
- If you have a burning feeling with a moisturizer, you may want to use a different one.
- You can buy vaginal moisturizers over-the-counter without a prescription. Examples include: Replens®, Repagyn®, Gynatrof®, and Zestica®.

#### 4. Lubricants for sexual activity

Using a lubricant for sexual activity can help decrease your discomfort/pain with vaginal penetration. Apply the lubricant on the outside of your vagina and on fingers, penis, or sexual toy before vaginal penetration. Warm it up ahead of time by putting the sealed bottle of lubricant in a container of hot water.

If you have severe vaginal pain, or had all or part of your vagina removed during surgery, you may want to try anal sex. Use a condom and lots of water-based lubricant for anal sex. Ask your partner to move slowly. It is important to be as relaxed as possible before you begin. Tell your partner what feels good and what does not. You can have an orgasm during anal sex because there are sensitive nerve endings in the vagina that may be stimulated.

Most pharmacies sell different kinds of lubricants. You can also purchase them online or at an adult sex store. You may want to try different types to find one you like best. Lubricants in pump containers can be easy to reapply during sexual activity.

Kind of lubricant	What you need to know about this lubricant
Water based lubricants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comes in both a gel and liquid.</li> <li>• Lubricants that are thin are more like your body’s natural lubrication. Gels like K-Y® Jelly or Surgilube® (used by doctors for pelvic and rectal exams) are often too thick and dry out quickly.</li> <li>• Are safe to use with sex toys.</li> <li>• Can get sticky and need to be reapplied often. Adding a little water or saliva can help reactivate them.</li> <li>• A good choice if you have sensitive skin. Check the ingredients. Ingredients such as propylene glycol and chlorhexidine can be irritating.</li> <li>• Easy to clean up with water or a warm cloth.</li> </ul>
Warming or cooling sensation lubricants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use small amounts.</li> <li>• Mix it with a water-based lubricant if you need more lubrication.</li> </ul>

Kind of lubricant	What you need to know about this lubricant
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some products are intense (very warm or very cold feeling).</li> <li>• Test it first on an area like the back of your hand or the inside of your forearm before applying to your vaginal area.</li> </ul>
Silicone based lubricants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often last longer and feel more natural because it does not absorb easily into the skin.</li> <li>• Works well in the shower or tub because it does not break down in water. You may need soap for cleanup.</li> <li>• Do not use with sex toys unless they are made of medical grade silicone. A non-medical grade silicone can damage the sex toy.</li> <li>• If you're using latex condoms, read the label of the lubricant to see if it's approved for use with condoms.</li> <li>• Many are hypo-allergenic. This is a good option for women who have sensitive skin or prone to yeast or bladder infections.</li> <li>• Silicone lubricants tend to cost more than water-based lubricants, but you often need to use less.</li> <li>• Can stain your clothing or bed sheets.</li> <li>• Can be more expensive than water based lubricants.</li> </ul>
Flavored lubricants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually contain sugar.</li> <li>• Do not use if you are a diabetic.</li> <li>• Do not use if you are prone to yeast or bladder infections.</li> <li>• Can be irritating to your vaginal area.</li> <li>• Use small amounts if you have sensitive skin.</li> </ul>

**5. Topical estrogen**

- You may want to consider a topical estrogen treatment if using vaginal moisturizers and lubricants do not prevent pain with sexual activity.
- You need a prescription for it.
- Estrogen is not a safe option for some people with cancer. Talk to the nurse practitioner or doctor to see if it is a safe for you.
- The amount of estrogen in low-dose estrogen treatments is enough to make your vagina more moist and stretchy. It is not enough to affect other parts of your body.
- Estrogen creams can be put on the outside or inside of your vagina. Estrogen creams or tablets can be put inside your vagina using an applicator. Estrogen creams and tablets are best used before bedtime.
- Use the estrogen cream/tablet every day for 2 weeks then 2 to 3 times a week. It can take up to 3 weeks to work.

Some moisturizers and lubricants can damage condoms and diaphragms, making them ineffective for birth control. Ask your nurse practitioner or doctor about other options for birth control. The Centre for Sexuality website at [www.centreforsexuality.ca](http://www.centreforsexuality.ca) offers information on birth control options. Click on 'sexual health' then 'birth control'.

## **Managing tight vaginal muscles**

Tight (stiff) muscles around the opening of your vagina are a common cause of pain during sexual activity. If you expect pain with vaginal penetration, the muscles in your body may tighten (muscle spasm). This includes the muscles at the opening of your vagina.

### What you can do to manage this:

If vaginal penetration is painful, try genital caressing. Being aroused is the natural way your body gets ready for sexual activity. If your body has enough time to get aroused, the tissues in your vagina will expand. This takes up to 20 minutes for most women. It can take longer if you are post-menopausal. When this happens, there is more room in the vagina for a finger, penis, or sex toy.

### **1. Pelvic floor exercises (or Kegel exercises)**

Your pelvic floor muscles are in your pelvis and support your internal organs. These muscles control the opening of your vagina and anus, and when you pass urine. If your pelvic floor muscles are too tight, you can have pain with sexual activity. If your pelvic floor muscles are not tight enough, you may have leaking of urine (incontinence).

Pelvic floor exercises help you learn to relax and tighten your pelvic floor muscles. This can eliminate pain during sexual activity. Being aware of the feelings in your pelvis and vaginal area can help increase your sexual desire. Stronger pelvic muscles can help you reach orgasm easier. If you are able to have full penetration without tightness or pain, you can try tightening and relaxing these muscles during vaginal penetration.

### How to do pelvic floor exercises

- Wash your hands with soap and warm water for 15 seconds.
- Lie on your back or sit against pillows with your knees bent and open.
  - a. Imagine there is a ping pong ball sitting right outside your vagina. Squeeze the ball with your vaginal muscles and pull the ping pong ball inward. Pull it in and up towards your belly button. Try to squeeze the muscles of your vagina for 3 seconds and then relax them. Do not tighten the muscles in your abdomen, inner thighs, or buttocks while you do this. Repeat this 10 times.  
Or
  - b. Put some lubricant on a finger or use a tampon. Use your fingers to gently spread the inner lips (labia) of your vagina apart. Try to squeeze the muscles of your vagina and then relax them. When the muscles are relaxed, put your lubricated finger or tampon into the opening of your vagina. Hold it there and try to squeeze again. You should feel your vagina move a little when you gently squeeze the finger or tampon. Squeeze for 3 seconds and then relax as much as you can. You may feel a gentle push as you fully relax the muscles. Repeat 10 times.
- Do pelvic floor exercise twice a day.

Once you feel comfortable doing the pelvic floor exercises you can stop imagining the ping pong ball or inserting your finger or tampon. You can do the exercises in the shower, while you watch TV, or during lunch.

You may choose to see a pelvic health physiotherapist for help. To find a pelvic health physiotherapist, go to: [www.pelvichealthsolutions.ca](http://www.pelvichealthsolutions.ca) Look under 'find a health care professional'. For more information, you can also email [info@pelvichealthsolutions.ca](mailto:info@pelvichealthsolutions.ca)

## **2. Using a vaginal dilator**

Read the handout 'Using a Vaginal Dilator' included with this handout.

Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you have questions or concerns about any of the information in this handout.

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