

USING A VAGINAL DILATOR

A vaginal dilator is a cylinder or tube, most often made out of plastic or rubber, used to “dilate” or stretch out the vagina. Dilators also help women learn to relax the vaginal muscles. Dilators come in many forms.

Vaginal dilators are often used after radiation to the pelvis, cervix, or vagina. Using the dilator several times a week (three times is recommended) keeps your vagina from getting tight scar tissue as the irritation from radiation heals. The only real alternative to using the dilator is to have intercourse several times a week.

Since scarring in the pelvis after radiation can develop over many years, you should follow this schedule for the rest of your life. After surgery that rebuilds the vagina with skin grafts, you may need to keep a special type of dilator or “stent” in your vagina all day or night for a while.

Your doctor may suggest a certain way to use the dilator. The usual way to go about it, however, is as follows:

1. Lubricate the dilator with a water-based gel.
2. Lie down on your bed at a time when you know you will have at least 15 minutes of privacy. Gently and slowly slip the dilator into your vagina. If your vagina feels tight, hold the dilator still while you tense and relax your vaginal muscles.
3. When your vagina feels looser, push the dilator farther in. You may need to repeat the squeezing and relaxing a few times before the dilator is fully inserted. Some women find it helpful to bear down, pushing their vaginal muscles outward as if having a bowel movement.
4. When the dilator is in as far possible, leave it in your vagina for about 10 minutes. You can pass time by reading, watching TV, or even talking on the phone. If the dilator slips out, gently push it more deeply into your vagina.
5. When you remove it, wash it with mild soap and water. Be sure to rinse all the soap off so no film is left to irritate your vagina the next time you use the dilator.

A woman is often given one dilator of the size needed to fit her vagina. If she is trying to overcome pain, however, or needs to stretch out a vagina that is too small, she may use a series of dilators. She can start with one about the size of a finger and slowly go to larger models until her vagina is large to allow a man’s penis to enter without pain.

Dilators work best when used early to prevent vaginal shrinkage. Don’t wait until you have an overly tight vagina. The dilator will not be nearly as effective. If you go for many months without a sexual relationship, it becomes very important to use your dilator to keep your vagina in shape.