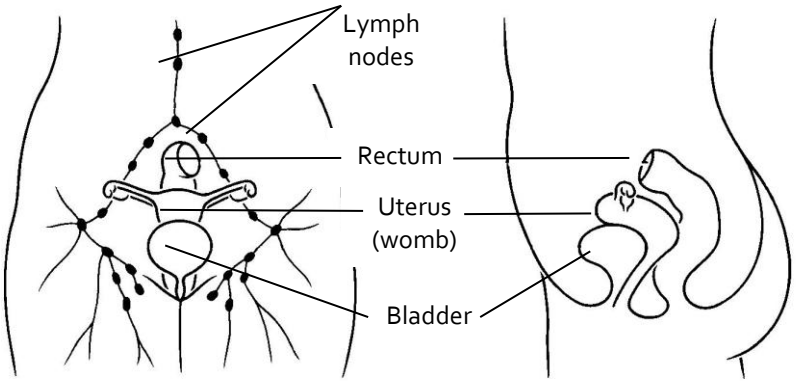
The ROYAL MARSDEN
NHS Foundation Trust

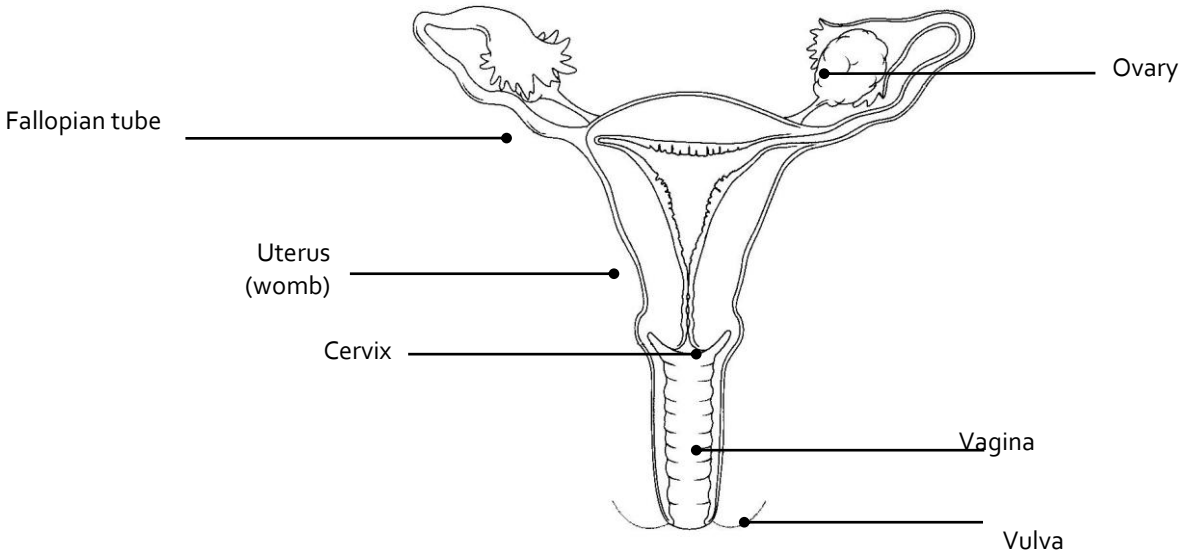
Patient information

Feminine care for women having pelvic radiotherapy

This factsheet gives you information about some of the specific effects of radiotherapy to the female reproductive organs.



Pelvic radiotherapy is given most often for cancers of the cervix or uterus but can be given for any cancer which affects the structures or organs of the pelvis, for example, the anus, rectum and bladder. The female reproductive organs are located in the pelvis.



As part of the consent process, your clinical team will have given you specific information about the possible side effects of radiotherapy, which can occur either during or following your proposed course of radiotherapy.

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Radiotherapy and Chemotherapy Services F538021 & F538022

There are two types of radiotherapy that can be given to the pelvis - external beam and internal (brachytherapy). You may be having one or both types of treatment although brachytherapy is only routinely used for gynaecological cancers. Both external and internal radiotherapy cause changes to normal tissue. As a result of these changes on the tissue of the vagina, women may experience some or all the following side effects.

Side effects which can occur during treatment include:

- Soreness (inflammation) of the vagina (vaginitis)
- Thickening of vaginal secretions
- Vaginal discharge
- Vulval redness and soreness

Side effects that can occur any time after the end of treatment include:

- Formation of scar tissue (fibrosis)
- Vaginal dryness

Scar tissue can lead to a shortening and narrowing of the vagina. This can make a vaginal examination and sexual intercourse more difficult or painful. Your clinical nurse specialist will discuss these issues with you.

Vaginal care during radiotherapy treatment

If you are experiencing an unpleasant or uncomfortable discharge, please ask advice from your doctor or clinical nurse specialist.

Can I still have sex during the course of treatment?

If you want to continue with intercourse during radiotherapy and it is comfortable to do so, then there is no medical reason to stop. There is no radiation inside you because of your treatment, and you can have normal physical contact with your partner.

Remember that you should continue using contraception until advised otherwise by your doctor or specialist nurse. Please discuss what contraception method is most suitable for you to use. Do not use a spermicidal cream during your course of radiotherapy as the failure rate is high (28%) and it is not a reliable form of contraception.

During and after treatment your vagina could become sore and dry. You may wish to try using a water-soluble or silicone-based lubricant when you want to have intercourse.

It is not unusual to experience slight bleeding or spotting after sex, either during the course of treatment or in the years following treatment. If you are worried about any bleeding following sex, then please talk to your doctor or specialist nurse.

Vaginal care after radiotherapy treatment has finished

Using a vaginal dilator may help prevent or reduce the vagina narrowing and shortening, caused by formation of scar tissue, after radiotherapy.

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Vaginal dilation and dilators

Vaginal dilation means stretching and opening of the vagina. It can be done by using a dilator, vibrator, fingers or by having penetrative vaginal intercourse.

A vaginal dilator is a smooth, plastic tube which comes in four sizes. Your specialist nurse will advise you on which size to start with although it is usual to start with a smaller size and progress towards a larger size that is still comfortable.

When do I start using a dilator?

We recommend that you begin to use your dilator about four weeks after the end of your radiotherapy. If you are having radiotherapy immediately before surgery, for example, in the treatment of some rectal cancers, you may be advised to start using your dilator at a different time. Please discuss this with your consultant oncologist or surgeon.

Use your dilator at least three times a week for five to ten minutes each time. If you prefer you could use a vibrator instead of the dilator. Some women may wish to use dilators even if they are having regular sexual intercourse.

How do I use the dilator?

Try to relax before you start and use the following steps as a guide.

- Place a water-soluble or silicone lubricant on the rounded end of the dilator – **do not** use an oil-based lubricant.
- Lie on your back with your knees bent and slightly apart, either on the bed or in the bath.
- Insert the rounded end of the dilator into your vagina gently and press it in as far as is comfortable without forcing the dilator. The top of your vagina is closed so you will not lose the dilator.
- Once the dilator is inside the vagina, move it backwards and forwards, then left to right over five to ten minutes. If you can, gently rotate the dilator using the handle.
- Withdraw the dilator and clean it with warm soapy water. Rinse and dry.

If you have difficulty inserting the dilator, change to a smaller size. If you notice tightness when using the dilator, please seek advice. You will see your doctor regularly for the first couple of years after treatment and you can discuss any issues you might have at those clinic appointments.

What if I bleed when using the dilator?

You may notice slight bleeding or 'spotting' after you have used your dilator – this is not unusual. If you have fresh heavy bleeding, then contact your doctor or specialist nurse.

How will treatment affect my sexual relationship?

Although for some people their diagnosis and treatment has no effect on their sexual relationship, for others it causes a loss of interest in sex which can continue after the treatment has finished. Try not to worry as this is normal and is usually temporary.

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There can be several reasons for losing interest in sex. You may have less sexual confidence, or it might seem that other things in your life are more important. Your partner might be worried about hurting you or you may need to try different sexual positions until you find one which is comfortable.

It may take time for you and your partner to adjust to the physical and emotional changes associated with your treatment. Sharing your feelings and concerns with each other can help both of you in returning to normal life after cancer. Sexual activity will not cause the cancer to return. Please talk to your doctor or specialist nurse if you would like extra support.

You may also like to contact one of the organisations listed on the following page, which offer information and support.

Contact details

If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact:

Consultant: .....

Specialist nurse: .....

Alternatively, please call:

The Royal Marsden Hotline: 020 8915 6899
(available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

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Sources of information and support

Macmillan Cancer Support
89 Albert Embankment, Lambeth, London SE1 7UQ
Macmillan Support Line: 0808 808 00 00 (8am – 8pm, seven days a week)
Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Provides free information and emotional support for people living with cancer and can advise about local cancer support groups and organisations near you. They have many publications on cancer, its treatment and practical issues of coping, such as benefits and returning to work after treatment.

Cancer Research UK
2 Redman Place, London E20 1JQ
Tel: 0808 800 4040 (Monday to Friday, 9am - 5pm)
Website: www.cancerresearchuk.org

Trained cancer nurses can provide information and support relating to cancer and its treatments.

Jo's Trust
7 – 14 Great Dover Street, London SE1 4YR
Tel: 0808 802 800 (please see the website for opening hours as these vary day to day)
Website: www.jostrust.org.uk

Provides online information, confidential expert medical advice, counselling and support about all aspects of cervical cancer.

Sexual Advice Association
Building 3, Chiswick Park, 566 Chiswick High Road, London W4 5YA
Helpline: 0207 486 7262
Website: www.sexualadviceassociation.co.uk

Provides information and support on all forms of sexual dysfunction for women and men.

Daisy Network
PO BOX 71432, London SW6 9HJ
Website: www.daisynetwork.org

The Daisy Network is a registered charity for women who have experienced premature menopause also known as premature ovarian insufficiency.

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