



Sexual Recovery

Sexual Function Aids for Women

IT'S IMPORTANT TO ADDRESS SEXUAL HEALTH NEEDS OF BOTH MEN WITH CANCER AND THEIR PARTNERS.

Partners play a very important role for men with cancer, often becoming the caregiver. When partners become caregivers and relationship roles change, the needs of the partner can be overlooked. It's important to address sexual health needs of both men with cancer and their partners.

The partner's sexual health is important on its own. It also impacts the sexual recovery of the survivor and the health of the relationship.

Menopause and Sexual Health

Female partners may be post-menopausal or going through the transition to menopause.

- Menopause causes a loss of estrogen in the body which has a direct impact on vaginal health.
- Loss of estrogen leads to loss of vaginal lubrication and the vaginal tissue can become thinner and less elastic.
- As a result, sexual activity may become painful.

If a woman is having menopause-related changes in vaginal health, like discomfort with or without sexual activity, it's important to address this problem because these side effects of menopause tend to last over time.

Maintaining vaginal health includes restoring moisture and stretch to the vaginal tissue. Pleasurable sexual stimulation either with a partner or through masturbation is also healthy for the genital tissue.

Strategies for Female Sexual Health

Sexual aids are an important part of women’s sexual health. These include vaginal moisturizers, vaginal lubricants, vibrators and vaginal dilators. Here are some strategies to help with female sexual health:

VAGINAL MOISTURIZERS

Vaginal moisturizers provide long-term relief from dryness and irritation and may help restore health to vaginal and vulvar tissue. Just like moisturizing your face or hands, after menopause, moisturizing the vagina may help keep tissues healthy and strong.

Women typically apply moisturizer 3 to 5 times per week, including both internal and external tissues (vulva). For best absorption, apply at bedtime before lying down.

There are a variety of over-the-counter vaginal moisturizers that are usually applied internally with a thin applicator.

Water-based lubricants

Water-based lubricants provide a natural feel and won’t leave a residue. They are widely available and come in a range of textures. However, water-based lubricants can start to feel sticky. To reduce stickiness and make the area slick again, add a spray of water. Water-based lubricants:

- Are easy to clean off.
- Do not stain.
- Are safe with condoms.
- Are safe to use with intimacy aids and intimacy toys that are made out of silicone.
- Have the lowest chance of an allergic reaction.

VAGINAL ESTROGEN THERAPY (HORMONAL MOISTURIZER)

Vaginal estrogen is a kind of hormone replacement therapy where you put cream or a small tablet in the vagina. It releases a small amount of estrogen within the vagina.*

Vaginal estrogen:

- Increases the thickness and elasticity of vaginal tissues.
- Increases natural vaginal lubrication.

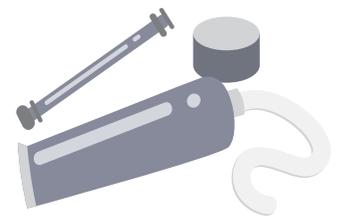
These benefits work to relieve vaginal dryness and lessen discomfort with intercourse.

Some women consider vaginal estrogen if non-hormonal options don’t help enough. Estrogen treatments are by prescription only.

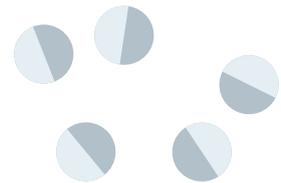
Vaginal estrogen comes in several forms, including: ^(Fig. 1)

- Cream
- Pills
- Ring

FIG 1. VAGINAL ESTROGENS



Cream



Pills



Ring

*You will need to talk to a doctor or gynecologist first before using vaginal estrogens. This is especially true if you have a family history of breast, ovarian, uterine, endometrial, or cervical cancer.

LUBRICANTS

Lubricants help make sexual activity more comfortable and enjoyable by making the surface tissue slick and reducing friction. Avoid lubricants that are flavored, scented, or that advertise a warming sensation, as they may be irritating. Lubricants can be used directly before sexual activity. There are several types of lubricants, including water-based, silicone-based, and petroleum/oil-based.

Silicone-based lubricants

Silicone-based lubricants do not get sticky because they are not absorbed by the skin. Silicone-based lubricants:

- Last longer than water based lubricants.
- Should be washed off.
- Should not be used with silicone/rubber toys or silicone dilators because they can break down the rubber over time.

Hybrid lubes

Hybrid lubes are a mixture of water and silicone based products. They have a natural feel and last longer because of the silicone. Like other silicone-based lubes, hybrid lubes should not be used with silicone sex toys or dilators.

Lubricants to Avoid

- AVOID COMMERCIAL OIL-BASED LUBRICANTS LIKE PETROLEUM JELLY AND BABY OIL. These oil-based products can break down and damage latex and rubber products and can cause tears in condoms. They can also change pH balance of the vagina which may raise the risk of bacterial infection.

- AVOID LUBRICANTS WITH GLYCERIN. Any lubricants that contain glycerin can act like a sugar and promote bacterial infection as well as yeast infection. For that reason, it's best to avoid them.

VIBRATORS

People tend to think of vibrators primarily as sex toys. In fact, vibrators can also be used as sexual aids, whether you're the person who was treated for prostate cancer or a partner. Here are some benefits of vibrators:

- Sexual stimulation, including use of a vibrator, promotes blood flow to the genital tissue.
- Blood flow to the genitals helps to maintain genital health.
- Increased blood flow also improves sexual pleasure.
- Vibrators can provide extra stimulation to help individuals feel greater pleasure and reach orgasm.

Vibrators come in many sizes, shapes, and different functions.

- Some vibrators are small and meant for external use only, not penetration.
- Others vary in size and shape and can be used for penetrative sexual activity.
- Some vibrators are shaped to stimulate both the sensitive front wall of the vagina as well as the clitoris.

Individuals can use vibrators for self-touch and/or sexual rehabilitation. Couples can also use them together for sexual pleasure.

VAGINAL DILATORS

It is not uncommon for women to have pelvic pain, including pain with sexual activity. Although there are many reasons why women may suffer from pelvic pain, sometimes discomfort is caused by pelvic floor muscles which are tight and overly-engaged. A gynecologist can evaluate you to assess the cause of discomfort.

Vaginal dilator therapy is one strategy used to help women learn to relax the pelvic floor and increase vaginal capacity. It works by gently stretching the vaginal tissue. The goal of vaginal dilator therapy is also to **reduce pain with intercourse by keeping the muscles relaxed.**

Dilators are tube-shaped cylinders, usually made of silicone or hard plastic. Dilators vary in size from small to large. A woman can go from using smaller sizes to a larger sized dilator as she learns to relax the pelvic floor muscles and gradually expands vaginal capacity.

Many women discuss this issue with their gynecologist and get a prescription for the dilators. Dilators can also be purchased over the counter. A physical therapist with expertise in pelvic floor rehabilitation can help you learn how to use them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Content credit to Sharon Bober, PhD of Dana Farber Cancer Institute and Daniela Wittmann, PhD, MSW of University of Michigan.

Graphic content credit to CHCR (The Centre for Health Communications) University of Michigan.

Published pilot: Wittmann et al. BMC Cancer (2017) 17:664 DOI 10.1186/s12885-017-3652-3