

Management of vaginal dryness and breast cancer

Some breast cancer treatments block or reduce the amount of the hormone oestrogen in your body. Oestrogen helps maintain the vagina's moisture and elasticity, a lack of it can cause the vagina to become dry and less supple. Vaginal dryness can affect many aspects of your life, including making sex and intimacy painful. It is a common but treatable problem.

Non -hormonal management (advised to be tried first)

Vaginal moisturisers

These may be used to keep your vagina moist and to relieve the ongoing discomfort experienced with vaginal dryness. Use at night for best absorption, apply to the vagina and genitals for 2 weeks and then use every 1 to 3 days. It can take up to 4 weeks to see an improvement. **Preparations include:**

- Replens MD Balance Activ plus
- Regelle YesVM

However, vaginal moisturisers do not reverse the changes experienced with lower oestrogen levels, therefore ongoing use of these products is advised.

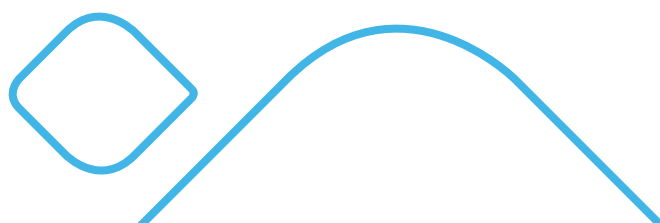
Vaginal lubricants (lube)

These are shorter acting than moisturisers and provide temporary relief. Lubricants are available as a pessary, gel or tube of liquid. It is worth trying different brands, as you might prefer some to others. Apply lube just before sexual intercourse and they work best if used by both you and your partner. There is no right or wrong amount to use- whatever feels good works. **Preparations include:**

- Sylk Replens lubricant
- Astroglide Yes lubricant

Many people have heard of KY jelly, but this is not a particularly effective lubricant and can cause irritation to the vaginal tissues and may feel gritty.

Water based or silicone lube are always safe to use with any kind of condom. Do not use anything that has oil in it like lotion, Vaseline or oil based lubes, with latex condoms, as it can cause them to break.



Emollients

Preparations including Zerocream, Cetaban and Hydromol range, are suitable to wash with, instead of using soaps and shower gels, which can cause dryness and irritation to the genitals and vagina.

Vaginal moisturisers, lubricants and emollients can be purchased over the counter, online or via your GP on prescription. Many websites send free samples, so try a few and see what works for you and your partner. Always check the ingredients in case you or your partner are allergic to them.


General vulval care

- Wash using emollient cream as soap substitute each day and shower rather than bath. Gently dab the vulval area dry with a soft towel or use a hairdryer on a cool setting.
- If your skin is irritated, emollient cream can be kept in the fridge and dabbed on to cool and soothe the skin as often as you like.
- Stop any irritants, such as using highly perfumed soaps, shower gels, biological washing powders, fabric conditioners, toilet paper and sanitary products.
- Wear 100% cotton underwear and avoid wearing tight clothing for long periods of time.
- Sleep without underwear
- Drink plenty of water to keep your body, including your vagina, hydrated
- Stop smoking, as this reduces blood flow to the genital area and vagina
- If you are due cervical screening and are experiencing vaginal dryness, tell the nurse or doctor beforehand so they are aware.
- Vaginal dryness / irritation can be caused by infection, so please get this checked by your GP
- Sexual intercourse, if comfortable for you, can stimulate blood flow to the vagina and help maintain suppleness and elasticity. Regular use of dilators or vibrators may also help.
- Doing regular pelvic floor exercises increases blood flow and relaxes the pelvic muscles. Being able to relax these muscles will ease pain during sex or intimacy and for procedures such as cervical screening

Caution : emollients contain oils and when in contact with clothing, or bedlinen, there is a danger of fire when near a naked flame. Wash clothing daily and bedlinen frequently if in contact with emollients.

Vaginal oestrogens

Hormone replacement therapy is not normally recommended for people after a breast cancer diagnosis, as the hormones may increase the risk of a new breast cancer or a cancer recurrence, but in some cases it may be considered, after review by either the Oncology Menopause Clinic, Breast Oncologist, Surgeon or Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist.



The oestrogen is a topical preparation and is available as a pessary, vaginal tablet, cream or vaginal ring.

Vaginal oestrogens mainly act locally, but some oestrogen is absorbed into the body. Therefore, vaginal oestrogen may be more safely prescribed for those taking tamoxifen, as the tamoxifen is thought to counteract any oestrogen entering the bloodstream.

If you are taking an aromatase inhibitor e.g. Letrozole, Anastrozole or Exemestane, vaginal oestrogen is not usually advised, as it is thought to reduce the effectiveness of this medication.

For those with problematic vaginal dryness, it is essential to discuss your management options with your Oncologist or Breast Cancer Specialist. Your health and comfort are very important and quality of life issues are considered a part of your overall treatment.

General information

Your Breast Clinical Nurse Specialist (01225 824057) or GP will also be able to provide information and address any concerns you may have.

The following websites provide information on the management of vaginal dryness.

Women's Health Concern (Menopause wellness hub)

www.womens-health-concern.org

Menopause Matters

<http://www.menopausematters.co.uk/>

Breast Cancer Now

breastcancernow.org

British Association of Dermatologists (Vulval skin care)

<https://www.bad.org.uk>

Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust
Combe Park, Bath, BA1 3NG

01225 428331 | www.ruh.nhs.uk

If you would like this leaflet in email form, large print, braille or another language, please contact the Patient Support and Complaints team on 01225 825656.

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