

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

It is recommended that non hormonal management of vaginal dryness is tried first.

Suitable preparations include:

Vaginal moisturisers

These are designed to keep your vagina moist and relieve ongoing discomfort experienced with vaginal dryness. Apply daily at night for best absorption, for up to 2 weeks and then use every 3 days. It can take 3 to 4 weeks to see an effect.

Preparations include:

- Replens MD
- Regelle
- Yes VM

Vaginal lubricants

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. They are applied just before sexual intercourse and work best if used by both you and your partner.

Preparations include:

- Sylk

- Astroglide
- Yes lubricant
- Replens lubricant

Many people have heard of KY jelly, but this is not a particularly effective lubricant.

Emollients

Preparations including Zerocream, Zerobase and Cetaban 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 and lubricants can be purchased over the counter or online. Emollients can also be purchased over the counter but your GP can prescribe these if necessary. 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 are allergic to them.

Other recommendations

- 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
- Stop any irritants such as using highly perfumed soaps, washing powders, fabric conditioners, toilet paper and sanitary products.
- Wear cotton underwear and avoid wearing tight clothing for long periods of time.
- Drinking plenty of water will 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

Vaginal oestrogens

Hormone replacement therapy (orally or as a patch) is not recommended for women after a breast cancer diagnosis because the hormones may increase the risk of a new breast cancer or a cancer recurrence.

However, some specialists may prescribe a topical hormone treatment which is applied directly to the area. This could be an oestrogen pessary, vaginal tablet or cream.

Vaginal oestrogens mainly act locally, but some oestrogen is absorbed into the body. Therefore, vaginal oestrogen may be more safely prescribed for women taking tamoxifen, because 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 recommended because it is thought to reduce the effectiveness of this medication.

For women 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.

NHS Website

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/dry-vagina/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

Menopause Matters

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

Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust
Combe Park, Bath BA1 3NG
01225 428331 www.ruh.nhs.uk

Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) if you require this leaflet in a different format, or would like to feedback your experience of the hospital. Email ruh-tr.pals@nhs.net or telephone 01225 825656 / 826319