



## **Information on How to Improve your Vulvovaginal Health.**

### **What is Vulvovaginal Health?**

A cancer diagnosis and its treatment can bring about changes to your body. Vulvovaginal health is concerned with the health of your vulva (the skin on the outside of your vagina) and vagina. As we get older irrespective of a cancer diagnosis our skin gets dryer and less elastic (stretchy). The skin on your vagina and your vulva is no different. This happens sooner if you have had surgery for a cancer, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, or risk reducing surgery because of a genetic mutation. Some cancer treatment can result in premature menopause which can cause vaginal atrophy, which is a thinning, drying, and inflammation of the vaginal walls when your body has less estrogen. This can cause pain with it comes to sexual closeness (sexual caressing of the vulva and vaginal intercourse for example) or a gynaecological examination. You may experience itching, burning, and be more prone to urinary tract and vaginal infections. To reduce the risk of these side effects, restoring lubrication and a natural pH to the vagina and vulva is key.

Some people may be offered the hormone estrogen to slow down this process, however this may not be a safe option for everyone. This information leaflet can assist you in looking after this area of your body and managing vaginal and vulva dryness. This should be done in consultation with the doctors and nurse specialists who are involved in your care. It is most important to know that what you are experiencing is normal and that you should not suffer in silence.

### **Vaginal and Vulval Moisturisers**

Vaginal and vulval moisturisers help to increase moisture in your vagina and vulva and improve tissue quality. Moisturisers are different to lubricants which are used during sexual activity. Vagina and Vulval moisturisers can be used as frequently as you like, similar to how you would moisturise your face or the rest of your body.

You can access over the counter vaginal and vulval moisturisers in your pharmacy which will be non-hormonal. You can buy them online also without a prescription. Here are some examples of vaginal and vulval moisturisers;

#### **Hydrating Types**

##### **Hyalofemme**

- This moisturiser can be inserted into your vagina with a disposable applicator that comes with it, or it can be put on your vulva or both.



- It will reduce vaginal dryness and provide relief from irritation.
- It is long lasting and a natural way (hormone free) to treat vaginal dryness.
- It can be purchased online or with your pharmacy.

## Replens

- This is a long-lasting vaginal moisturiser.
- It can be applied topically to your vagina or inserted into your vagina with a disposable applicator or both.
- It can be purchased online or with your pharmacy.

## Yes VM

- Yes VM vaginal moisturiser is a topical moisturiser and it also comes with a pre filled applicator.
- It is natural and free from hormones.
- Yes VM is iso-osmotic to vaginal tissues, this means that it will rehydrate tissues that need it but will not pull or push water into tissue that does not.
- It is available online.

## Natural oils (soothing effect)

### Natural oils

- Such as vitamin E or coconut oil can be used inside or outside your vagina.
- They can be purchased online, in your pharmacy or health food store.

### Carlson Key E Suppositories

- These are suppositories that you can put into your vagina.
- They can be purchased online but can be difficult to source at times.

## Using vaginal and vulval moisturisers

While all products come with their own instructions below is a useful guide on how to help you use vaginal and vulva moisturisers and get the most from them.

- The best time to use vaginal and vulva moisturisers is before you go to bed, it will optimise the absorption time.
- How frequently you will need to use these products depends on where you are in your cancer treatment. If you recently finished treatment or are going through



treatment/surgically induced menopause, then you may need to use these products three to five times a week.

- To make this process easier you can put lubricant on the top of the applicator.
- You can use vaginal moisturisers on your vulva, including your inner and outer labia (the skin around your vagina). Put a small amount of moisturiser (the size of a small marble) on your fingertip. Then massage the moisturiser into your vaginal opening and onto your labia.

If you are currently using vaginal estrogen, alternate the nights that you use vaginal moisturisers (every second night).

If you are wearing pantyliners or pads when you are using a moisturiser or for urine incontinence (leaking urine) it is worthwhile considering using a skin protector cream such as Balmex, Bepanthen or Aquaphor. Using pads can make your skin dry, by putting a skin protector cream on your vulva before using the pads it will assist in sealing in the moisture and protecting your skin.

## **Vaginal Lubricants**

Vaginal lubricants are a short-term aid to assist with lubrication during sexual activity. While most of us produce our own natural lubricant, cancer treatment, aging and menopause are some of the causes that reduce our ability to produce our own lubricant. Lubricants make sexual activity (sexual intercourse, touch etc) more pleasurable. There are many types of vaginal lubricants, they normally come in a liquid form. They are used to minimise dryness and pain during sexual activity and gynaecological exams. Water and silicone based are recommended. Some examples are

### **Water Based Lubricants**

- Sliquid
- Yes
- Astroglide
- Aquagel

Water based lubricants are safe to use with condoms, both latex and non-latex. These can be purchased online, or some pharmacies may stock them.

### **Silicone Based Lubricants**

- Astroglide silicone
- Pjur
- Uberlube



Silicone based lubricants are best if you have sensitive skin. They are safe to use with condoms.

### **Oil Based Lubricants**

- Yes OB

Oil based lubricants cannot be used with a latex condom. They are also associated with a high rate of infection and it will stain your sheets!

### **Natural Oil Based Lubricants**

- Almond oil
- Coconut oil
- Sliquid Organic

Your skin may be extremely sensitive as a result of the surgery and treatments you have undergone for the cancer. It is important to remember that semen, saliva (spit) and some ingredients (such as chlorhexidine, glycerin and propylene glycol) can cause significant discomfort and irritation. Avoid flavoured, coloured, or heating effect lubricants as these can cause further irritation and drying of the vagina and vulva area. Never use petroleum jelly (Vaseline) as a lubricant, it can irritate the area and increase your risk of infection.

### **How to use vaginal lubricants**

Place the lubricant on the opening of your vagina and on whatever is being placed in or around your vagina, such as a dilator, finger, or your partner's penis, before it enters your vagina.

### **Vaginal Estrogen**

Vaginal estrogen is a hormone-based medication that is only available with a prescription from a doctor. The reasons for this, is that it is not suitable for everyone. Depending on the type of cancer you have, you may or may not be a candidate for it. It is important to discuss this with your treating doctor who maybe an oncologist (doctor who specialises in cancer), gynaecologist oncologist (surgeon who specialises in women's cancers) or breast surgeon depending on what type of cancer you were diagnosed with. Topical or estrogen therapy is an excellent way of treating vaginal atrophy (thinning of the skin on the vaginal wall) for postmenopausal women in the general population.

### **Vaginal Dilators**

Vaginal dilators are typically prescribed to stretch the tissue in the vagina and prevent vaginal atrophy after radiotherapy to the area. They can be highly effective in improving vaginal



comfort and pelvic floor muscle control. They can also be used to inform a woman about how their body responds to internal examinations. They can provide feedback to a woman as they learn to control tension and relaxation in the pelvic floor muscle. It can increase confidence that an object, like a speculum, may be inserted into the vagina without distress or pain. It is important to get dilators that you are comfortable with and give you the best possible chance of using them. Silicone dilators are warm to touch, flexible and more phallic (penis) like than hard plastic ones.

Regular sexual activity can also help maintain a healthy vagina. Depending on your circumstances vaginal dilators can be extremely helpful in treating vaginal discomfort if you do not have a partner or perhaps are lacking desire for penetrative sex at this time. The use of a clitoral therapy device (battery operated vacuum device with a small funnel that fits over the clitoris to increase blood flow to the area) can be highly effective in arousing self-stimulation and dilate the vagina through increasing blood flow.

### **How to use a dilator**

- There will be different sizes of dilators in your pack. Start with the smallest one and work up to the largest one over time if comfortable for you to do so.
- It is important that you create a relaxed atmosphere and a private space. Make sure you are in a good head space. It's very personal so you may or may not want to involve your partner. What is most important is that you figure out what works for you.
- Using them in the bath or a shower can be highly effective as the pelvic floor will be more relaxed. You can be in different positions inserting them, lying on your back with your knees apart, or standing up with one leg raised on something to support it.
- Really important to add lubrication to the entrance of the vagina area as well as all over the dilator (see previous section for appropriate lubrication). If you feel comfortable, use a mirror to guide the exercise.
- Take a few short breaths and relax, then begin to insert the dilator gently. You may need to use gentle pressure and there can be a pain barrier that you may have to overcome, it will get easier over time.
- Get it as deep as is comfortable for you, don't force it.
- Take a deep breath and as you blow out, gently push the dilator in further, repeat this step. The goal is to get the dilator to the top of the vagina.
- Once inside the vagina carefully move the dilator forward, back and left to right. Creating a circular rotation, if comfortable to do so.
- When removing the dilator try to do so in a circular motion.
- Repeat this exercise several times over 5 to 10 minutes.
- Try to use the dilators several times a week.
- Wash your dilator with warm water and soap after each use.

### **Complementing Sexual Intimacy**



Lubricants, sex toys and lingerie can all complement our intimacy world. Our sexual selves and our sex life evolve over time, what worked for you in your 20s may not work for you in your 50s. What stimulated you then may also have changed. This is normal and expected. There are many sex shops in Ireland and online. Some Gynaecological Oncologists and Allied Health Professionals based in Ireland have collaborated with Shawna Scott, founder of the women's health website [www.bodygra.ie](http://www.bodygra.ie) to supply women of Ireland with products that we know will complement getting their intimacy life back on track.

There are many stores and websites available in Ireland and beyond, see list below. We do not endorse any of these companies.

#### Websites

[www.seksiopa.ie](http://www.seksiopa.ie) .

[www.loveangles.ie](http://www.loveangles.ie)

[www.playblue.ie](http://www.playblue.ie)

[www.lovematic.ie](http://www.lovematic.ie)

This leaflet has been compiled by the Living Well Cancer Program based in the Mater Hospital and St Vincent's University Hospital. Special thanks to Jeanne Carter of Memorial Sloan Kettering for permission to adapt her Vulvovaginal Health Handout.

#### Reference

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