Vaginal Dilators

We have found that many women who have vulvar pain conditions also have "vaginismus", which results from the pelvic floor muscles tightening in anticipation or response to pain. This tightening response often leads to vulvar pain and painful sexual penetration. Lubrication is also compromised when discomfort is associated with sexual touching and can compound painful sexual intercourse.

Vaginal dilators are silicone or plastic products that are available in a variety of sizes. They are to be used in the privacy of one’s home to gain confidence, knowledge and awareness of the vagina and pelvic floor muscles. The goal of vaginal dilator therapy is to learn what triggers the pelvic floor muscles to contract and to develop strategies to keep the pelvic floor relaxed and soft, as you gently introduce dilators of progressively larger sizes into the vagina. With confidence, the insertion of dilators can be comfortable; that skill is then transferred to sexual activities.

At-home Dilator Therapy

Read completely before beginning your first session.

Since relaxation is essential for your success, it is important to select a time and a place when you can have privacy and comfort to practice dilator therapy. Start with the smallest dilator if you are using a set of dilators. Begin by liberally lubricating both your vaginal opening (vulva) and the dilator, which will ensure that the dilator will be slippery and easy to place in the vagina.

Now lie on your back with your legs bent or lie on your side in a comfortable position. Notice your body. With your mind’s eye scan your body for any areas of tension and focus on relaxing them. Pay particular attention to relaxing your abdomen, buttocks and thighs and pelvic floor muscles. When you feel that you are relaxed, slip the dilator gently into your vagina. Continue to breathe in a relaxed manner. After a few minutes slowly remove the dilator. Follow the manufacturer’s recommendation for cleaning and storage.

If you notice any discomfort, burning or tightening, try one of the following strategies that have been recommended by patients and professionals:
1. **Follow your out-breath, as you let go and soften the muscles of the pelvic floor.** It is easier to relax the muscles during the exhalation phase of the breath cycle. Several women have suggested that counting aloud as they exhale is helpful.

2. **Visualize your vagina and pelvic floor in a state of softness.** A patient offered this image: “imagine my vagina is made of stretchy elastic that can expand at my will. I picture my vagina enlarging to accept the dilator.”

3. **Carefully attend to the messages you are receiving from your body.** Keep your belly soft and open to your breathing, keep your legs comfortably relaxed and keep your breathing easy. This will allow for gentle, gradual relaxation of the pelvic floor muscles.

The complete session, including the relaxation and dilator therapy, will last about fifteen minutes. You might only have the dilator in place for 5-10 minutes. Be patient and gentle with yourself. Success is your ability to relax the pelvic floor muscles for any time period. When the dilator you are using is very comfortable and easy to place in the vagina, you can progress to the next larger dilator. Some women will benefit from doing this exercise daily and others every other day. Please ask your clinician or physical therapist what is appropriate for you.

When you are using the dilator that is approximately the size of your partner’s penis, you might consider adding intercourse to your sexual sharing. Initially you will feel more comfortable using positions for intercourse where you feel that you have the most control on the pacing, depth and intensity of penetration.

If you feel “stuck” or unable to work with the dilator comfortably, consider consulting a psychotherapist or physical therapist with expertise in this area. They should be familiar with vaginismus and vulvar pain and able to assist you in progressing through the vaginismus treatment program. Psychotherapy can help with unresolved personal or relational issues. Physical therapy can be assist in specific treatments to relax muscles of the pelvis including manual therapy, exercise, and biofeedback.

Finding the right physical therapist for you is vital to your therapy and journey towards improvement. If a physical therapist is not specifically recommended to you by your vulvar provider, these websites can be explored to find a therapist in your city or region.

http://www.apta.org/
http://www.womenshealthapta.org/