**The Impact of Cancer Treatment on Your Sexual Health:**

**Understanding Vaginal Stenosis**

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Vaginal stenosis is a narrowing, shortening, closing or loss of flexibility of the vagina, which could make sexual intercourse and pelvic exams painful. Various cancer treatments can lead to vaginal stenosis, the most common being pelvic radiation, often used to treat women with gynecologic or colorectal cancers. Chemotherapy, surgery and hormonal changes can also cause or worsen vaginal stenosis due to inflammation, scarring, reduction of blood flow and hardening of these tissues. As oncology wellness has advanced, several proven strategies are available to help avoid or minimize this problem. While sex may not be at the top of your mind at the time of a cancer diagnosis, you should consider these issues when discussing treatment options with your doctor.

One effective strategy is using a dilator, which helps stretch and improve the flexibility of vaginal tissues. A vaginal dilator is tube-shaped and made of firm plastic or soft silicone. It is best to use a plastic dilator because it more effectively moves and stretches the muscles around your vagina. Dilators usually come in a kit with several sizes, so you can start small and increase the size over time. It is important to use a water-based lubricant (such as Astroglide or K-Y) with the dilator to make the process as comfortable as possible. Avoid using Vaseline or other oil or silicone-based lubricants. It is also best to avoid warming lubricants or lubes that contain perfumes, spermicide, flavors or coloring, as these can irritate sensitive vaginal tissue.

With gentle pressure, gradually insert the rounded end of the dilator into your vaginal opening. Aim straight towards your spine (backbone) or slightly downwards, similar to inserting a tampon. Proceed slowly and pause when you experience slight discomfort or muscle tension. Never apply force, and stop if you feel pain. Perform a set of Kegel exercises (explained below) to relax your pelvic floor muscles and facilitate further insertion of the dilator. If you still encounter difficulty after the exercises, try taking deep breaths and refocus on relaxing your pelvic floor muscles while attempting to insert the dilator a bit further. Move the dilator gently within your vagina for 5 to 10 minutes. If needed, apply more lubricant during this process. Employ gentle pushing motions to facilitate stretching of the vaginal length. Rotate the dilator in wide circles at the back, middle and opening of your vagina to promote stretching the vaginal width.

Dilators should be used about twice a week for the rest of your life, even if you do not plan on having vaginal penetration, as this will allow for more comfortable vaginal exams for future health maintenance. Vaginal penetration with intercourse or intimate play with penetration using an appropriately sized vibrator or dildo can replace a vaginal dilation session. You should check with your doctor before engaging in vaginal intercourse or penetration if you have had radiation treatment to this area.

Increased blood flow to the pelvic and vaginal areas is also beneficial. You can accomplish this through self-stimulation or masturbation on a regular basis — particularly if you are not having sex with a partner. Kegel exercises are another way to increase blood flow and can easily be done anywhere. Kegel exercises, also known as pelvic floor exercises, target the pelvic floor muscles. By strengthening and toning the pelvic floor muscles, these exercises can improve various aspects of your health, including sexual function, bladder control, and overall pelvic support. To find the right muscles, imagine trying to stop the flow of urine midstream or tightening the muscles that prevent passing gas. These are the muscles you want to target. You can perform kegel exercises while lying down, sitting or standing — whatever is most comfortable for you. Contract the pelvic floor muscles by squeezing and lifting them. Imagine pulling them up and in. Try not to tighten the abdomen, buttocks or thighs while doing this. Once you have squeezed the pelvic floor muscles, hold the contraction for 5 to 10 seconds or as long as you can comfortably. Then release and allow the muscles to relax completely. Rest for a few seconds and then repeat. Try for a set of 10 repetitions three times a day. Gradually increase the duration and number of repetitions and do these exercises regularly to get the best results. You may not notice immediate changes, but with time and persistence, you should see improvement. There are also physiotherapists who specialize in pelvic floor therapy. Ask your insurer about your insurance benefits, co-pays, and in-network providers for pelvic floor therapy.

Even if sex is not a priority for you right now, it is vital to use a dilator and maintain good blood flow to the vaginal area so that you will be able to participate confidently in sexual intercourse when you are ready, as well as have vaginal exams in the future.

Effective communication is essential when it comes to your vaginal and sexual health. Although it might initially feel awkward, openly discussing these issues with your healthcare team allows them to provide the necessary care, guidance and referrals. Remember, they work with patients facing similar challenges every day. To facilitate effective communication with your healthcare provider, it can be beneficial to keep a journal documenting any discomfort or symptoms you experience during intimate encounters. This way, you can easily recall and discuss these details during your appointments. Additionally, the journal can be a valuable resource during a strategy session with your partner, where you can openly discuss ways to make intimate relations more comfortable for both of you. By noting your experiences and sharing them, you can work together to find solutions that enhance your comfort and overall intimacy.

Prioritizing your sexual health is important for maintaining your quality of life. Take charge of your well-being by proactively addressing and minimizing the potential effects of vaginal stenosis. Start by engaging in open conversations with your healthcare team and partner as soon as possible. By seeking support and guidance from these important individuals in your life, you can equip yourself with the knowledge and resources needed to navigate and overcome any challenges that may arise. Remember, taking proactive steps today can positively impact your sexual well-being in the future.

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