
Managing side-effects – Vaginal dryness and pain

Some women experience one or more side-effects from taking hormone therapy, others do not. There is no way to predict who will experience side-effects, and who won't.

It's important not to assume that any unwanted effect you might be experiencing after breast cancer is solely due to hormone therapy. There are a range of possible causes, such as other treatments (e.g. chemotherapy) or medicines. The normal ageing process and the menopause can also account for some symptoms women can experience. So stopping hormone therapy would not necessarily mean symptoms would disappear.

Side-effects can vary in level of intensity and this can change over time; a side-effect may become less frequent or intense or disappear altogether as time goes on. Again, it's not possible to predict whether this will happen to you. **Rather than looking at all the side effects now, you may find it helpful to come back to this page if and when your side effects change.**

The good news is that **there are many things that can help with side-effects.** This section includes information about some of the most common side-effects women can experience, and a range of tips and hints for managing these.

This section includes information on the following topics:

- What can help with vaginal dryness and pain?
- Further help and support

Vaginal dryness and pain

Hormone therapy can lead to dry skin all over the body, which can include the vagina. This can cause soreness, and irritation and can make you feel uncomfortable all day. This is also a common cause of sexual or vaginal pain.

Dry vaginal skin due to a reduction in vaginal blood flow and lubrication can make penetrative sexual intimacy painful, or even impossible. You may have heard this being called vaginal atrophy (or atrophic vaginitis), which is the thinning, drying and inflammation of the walls of the vagina that can occur when your body has less oestrogen.

Whatever the cause, there are several things you could try.

What can help with vaginal dryness and pain?

Here you can find some tips for what you can do to help with vaginal dryness and painful sex (which can happen if you have vaginal dryness).

Remember that **different things will help different people**, what works for someone else may not work for you. If one suggestion is not helpful try another, or a combination of them, to find something that works for you. Trying something to help you feel better can give you a sense of control of the situation, even if the first thing you try doesn't work.

What can help with vaginal dryness?

Lubricants and moisturisers

Intimate lubricants and moisturisers (which can be used inside the body) can help with vaginal dryness and irritation.

You can buy these over the counter, or get a prescription from your GP. Lubricants and moisturisers are all different, so if the first one you try does not suit you, you may find that a different type or brand is better. You can use lubricants and moisturisers together as they do slightly different things.

Non-hormonal vaginal moisturisers should be used regularly, 2 to 3 times per week. Many women find that this reduces feelings of dryness and itching in the vagina and vulva, and improves personal comfort even if they do not plan to be sexually active.

You may find it helpful to also try intimate lubricants, these can be used 'on-demand' immediately before sexual activity takes place. There are different types of lubricant - water, oil or silicone based.

I experienced terrible vaginal dryness...it felt like I was being stabbed down there. I felt like I had to do a lot of research myself about that as the nurse just advised paracetamol. After trying many vaginal lubricants (oestrogen free), YES was the perfect brand for me and now I don't even need it. So side effects also come and go and change over time. I think it's just important to be open and honest with your doctor / breast care team, and not hold back from telling them of any new symptoms.

-Tara, Breast Cancer Patient, Age 35

"One of the worst things was dryness of vagina ('YES Gel' was useful)."

-Jill, Breast Cancer Patient, Age 66

There are many products on the market, some available to buy online and others in shops.

These are just a small selection listed here. Examples include:

- **PJUR** products are available online. They include oil, silicon and water-based products. Note that water-based products are compatible with contraception. However always check the product you use is condom compatible if using condoms. To go to the PJUR website, type this weblink into your browser: <https://www.pjur.com/en/>
- **YES**, offer a full range of products, available online via a highly informative website, and from Holland and Barrett. Their products are all certified organic, guaranteed pure & natural, and approved by the Vegetarian Society. To go to the YES website, type this weblink into your browser: <https://www.yesyesyes.org/>
- **SYLK** supply intimate lubricant. You can buy this online and at some Boots stores. You can also request free samples from their website. To go to the SYLK website, type this weblink into your browser: <https://syhk.co.uk/>
- **Replens** is a vaginal moisturiser that you can buy from many chemists and supermarkets, as well as online. To go to the Replens website, type this weblink into your browser: <https://www.replens.com/>

Hormone based treatments for vaginal dryness

Vaginal dryness, vaginal atrophy and sexual pain associated with natural menopause is most commonly treated with oestrogen cream, pessaries or ring applied to the vagina or by HRT (hormone replacement therapy). However these treatments are not recommended for women who have had hormone sensitive (ER+) breast cancer, because they increase the amount of oestrogen in the body.

There are “topical” hormone treatments that some specialists may prescribe. These are applied directly to the vagina for a short period of time. Although these are oestrogen based, only minimal amounts of oestrogen are thought to be absorbed by the body. These are more likely to be suitable for women taking tamoxifen because of the way that it works against any oestrogen entering the bloodstream.

These treatments may be prescribed only when other non-hormonal vaginal products are not helpful.

You can speak to your oncologist, who may be able to prescribe something to help, or ask your GP for a referral to a specialist menopause service. If you feel uncomfortable speaking about this, you might like to read the **Top tips for speaking to your breast cancer team or a GP about sexual concerns** section.

What can help with painful sex?

Pain medication

Taking pain medication, in advance of sexual activity, can help with the pain. For example, you could take a paracetamol half an hour beforehand, particularly if this relates to bone, joint and muscle pain.

Vaginal laser treatment

If vaginal pain is constant, causing you distress and has not been relieved or reduced by the suggestions provided, you may consider a medical laser vaginal treatment.

An example of this is “MonaLisa Touch”. This treatment acts by re-activating the production of new collagen and re-establishing the conditions within the vagina prior to the drop in oestrogen.

This is not currently provided by the NHS. If you feel it may be an option for you, speak to your GP about a private referral. If you are unsure how to talk to your GP about this see our section on 'Top tips for talking to your health care professional'.

Increasing blood flow to the vagina and vulva tissues

Increasing blood flow to the vagina and vulva area may help to reduce pain. There are several ways that you can try to increase blood flow:

Vaginal dilators

Vaginal dilators can help to keep your vagina elastic. Clitoral and vaginal vibrators can increase blood flow and also help you to feel greater arousal and pleasure.

There are many vaginal dilator or vibrating products on the market, some available to buy online and others in shops. These are just a small selection. You may find you need to try a few to find one that suits you. Examples include Pleasure Solutions who supply sensory sex tools that help you to connect with your body following changes due to breast cancer. You can buy these online. To visit the Pleasure Solutions website, type the following weblink into your browser:
<https://pleasuresolutions.co.uk/>

Another option is Sh! Emporium, which sells a whole range of sexual products both online and in their London store. The store is run solely by women who know a lot about sexual concerns. You can phone, or chat online, explain your personal situation and they will discuss suitable products with you. To go to the Sh! website, type the following weblink into your browser: <https://www.sh-womenstore.com/>

Pelvic floor exercises

You may try doing pelvic floor exercises (sometimes known as Kegel exercises). These exercises can increase blood flow and help you learn to relax the muscles at the entrance of your vagina during vaginal sex and intimacy. This can reduce the tension and pain experienced at the vaginal entrance.

The NHS have an app that can support you with pelvic floor exercises, called the 'Squeezy' app. You are also able to get a referral from your GP to see a women's health physiotherapist for guidance with pelvic floor exercises. If you are unsure how to talk to your GP about this see our section on 'Top tips for talking to your health care professional'.

Start with touching and build up to more sexual activities

If you are experiencing pain when you have penetrative sex, you may find it helpful to **explore other ways of being intimate** with your partner, or with yourself.

For example, you could read erotic fiction together and mutually masturbate (touch yourself/each other intimately). This avoids painful or sensitive areas of your body.

It may be helpful to decide not to have penetrative sex for a specific period of time (perhaps 6-8 weeks) while you focus on activities that may improve your vaginal health (for example, using moisturisers or lubricants to help with vaginal dryness).

In this way, when you decide the time is right to return to having sex, both you and your partner may feel more relaxed and confident in engaging in more sexual activities.

Another technique that can help with rebuilding intimacy in this way is **Sensate Focus**.

Sensate focus is a way of focusing on your own or your partner's touch. It is a series of touching exercises that a couple completes in a sequence. The aim is for each person to let go of their expectations and judgements about how something "should" be or "should" feel. Instead, they simply enjoy the touch!

Sensate focus can teach us how to notice sensations in our bodies when we experience touch. When we are "in our heads" and thinking about other things (perhaps things that worry or upset us), we can find it difficult to relax and notice sensations in our body. By focussing on touch, sensate focus can help bring you out of your head and into your body.

In this way sensate focus is like a type of mindfulness (it's sometime called mindful touching) that can help individuals and couples to relax and enjoy the sensuality and sexuality of their bodies in ways that are helpful and enjoyable to them.

Sensate focus exercises can help to reduce sexual pain, increase desire and arousal and improve orgasm in women who've had a breast cancer. They can be used by people of all ages, sexual orientations and cultures.



If you would like to find out more about sensate focus you could type the following weblinks into your browser:

- SMSNA for Patients What is Sensate Focus and How Does it Work?:
<https://www.smsna.org/patients/did-you-know/what-is-sensate-focus-and-how-does-it-work>
- Cornell Health Sensate Focus:
<https://health.cornell.edu/sites/health/files/pdf-library/sensate-focus.pdf>

You can try sensate focus yourself but many women and couples find it helpful to initiate it with the help of a psychosexual or psychological therapist or counsellor.

There are several ways to find a sex therapist – your GP may be able to refer you to a therapist, although sex therapy is not available on the NHS in all parts of the UK. The charity Relate provide low cost or no cost therapy, or you may be able to find a local private therapist via the College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists (COSRT) or the Institute of Psychosexual Medicine. Links to these resources can be found on the **Further help and support** page. If you decide to see a therapist privately this will have a cost.

Self-touch

It may help to explore your body alone, to discover what kind of touch is still pleasant or where it is painful. You could use lubricated fingers, dilators or vibrators, and gradually increase vaginal exposure to touch.

You may also want to try some self-stimulation (masturbation) of your vagina and or clitoris, again using lubricated fingers or a vibrator. All of these strategies can help to improve vaginal health by increasing blood flow to the area.

You may wish to read the section on ‘Increasing blood flow to vagina and vulva tissues’, which provides information on where to buy vibrators and other products

Take control during sex

Once you feel more comfortable and confident engaging in penetrative sex there are a number of ways for you to take control during sex.

- You may wish to start with static penetration when you feel ready for it.
- Try experimenting with different sexual positions until you find one that's more comfortable for you. For example, you could try a side-lying position or try varying who is on top so you have increased control of depth, rate and angle of penetration.
- You can also ask your partner to slow down sexual movement to help with any discomfort.

Keeping a log of what works

You may wish to record when you have tried any of the suggestions described here, whether they were successful, or anything you may do differently next time.

You could do this using **My Hormone Therapy Diary** on the HT&Me website.

Recording this, and noting what has improved over time, may boost your confidence, and provide you with creative ideas for the next time you want to try to be intimate.

Further help and support

What should I do if these problems are really impacting on my life?

If these hints and tips do not help, and vaginal dryness and pain becomes very problematic for you and badly impacts on your day-to-day life, it is important to talk to your breast cancer team or GP. They may be able to suggest something else which will help.

Support from Breast Cancer Now Nurses

You may find it helpful to use the confidential '**Ask our nurses**' email service on the Breast Cancer Now website, especially if you find it difficult to talk to someone in person. To access this, type this weblink into your browser:
<https://breastcancernow.org/information-support/support-you/email-our-nurses>

Where can I speak to other women?

You do not have to cope with problems with vaginal dryness and pain weight on your own. You may find it helpful to join online forums and support groups to talk to other

women who are in a similar situation to you. One example of this is the Breast Cancer Now online forum. To take a look, type this weblink into your browser:
<https://forum.breastcancernow.org/>

Here are links to websites and reading that you may find helpful. To take a look, type the following weblinks into your browser:

- To go to Breast Cancer Now: The research and care charity:
<https://breastcancernow.org/>
- To go to COSRT: College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists: The UK's professional body for Psychosexual and Relationship Therapists:
<https://www.cosrt.org.uk/>
- To find a Booklet of Tips & Ideas for your Journey of Recovery, done by Intimacy & Sexuality Intimacy & Sexuality for Cancer Patients and their Partners:
https://breastcancernow.org/sites/default/files/intimacy_and_sexuality_for_cancer_patients_and_their_partners.pdf
- To go to Live Through This: A cancer support and advocacy charity for the LGBTIQ+ community: <https://livethroughthis.co.uk/>
- To go to Macmillan Cancer support: <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/>
- To find MacMillan Cancer Support information on how to get support and treatment that can help improve your sexual well-being:
<https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/treatment/coping-with-treatment/your-sex-life>
- To go to Relate: The relationship People (They offer a range of services to help you with your couple and family relationships, whether you're young or old, straight or gay, single or in a relationship): <https://www.relate.org.uk/>
- To go to Shine Cancer Support (They offer online and face to face support for individuals in their 20s, 30s and 40s with cancer. Their website contains information, including podcasts on topics including sex and dating):
<https://shinecancersupport.org/>
- To go to Tavistock Relationships (This is internationally renowned charity offering online and face to face psychosexual therapy to help resolve problems or difficulties in your sexual relationship):
<https://tavistockrelationships.org/>
- To go to The Institute of Psychosexual Medicine (This is a registered charity which provides training and undertakes research in psychosexual medicine. Their trained professionals can help people with a wide range of sexual difficulties): <https://www.ipm.org.uk/25/find-a-doctor>

If you feel that you have tried everything and the side-effects are still unbearable, do talk to your breast cancer team or GP who will be able to help you decide what to do. Often, they will be able to switch you to another form of hormone therapy or prescribe an additional treatment to help you. If that still doesn't work, the best decision for you might be to stop taking hormone therapy. Ultimately it is a personal decision taking into account the risks and benefits and what is right for you.