



Cancer Institute

## Vaginal Moisturizers and Lubricants

Women with severe vaginal dryness may want to use a vaginal moisturizer two to three times a week. Some vaginal moisturizers are gels that come with a tampon-style applicator to insert the gel into your vagina. Others are suppositories (small tablets) that melt in the vagina.

Vaginal moisturizers will not help much if you use them only when you have sex. They are meant to be used regularly (usually before bedtime) so that the inside of the vagina is moist and has a slightly acidic pH (similar to before menopause) all the time. Most moisturizers start to make a difference after a week or so. If you stop using a vaginal moisturizer, the vaginal dryness will return. No moisturizer contains female hormones.

Vaginal moisturizers are sold “over-the-counter” without a doctor’s prescription. Insurance plans will not pay for them. If you use a vaginal moisturizer three times a week, the cost may be between \$12 and \$40 each month.

Some vaginal moisturizers or lubricants have ingredients that you may want to avoid—for example, perfumes that can irritate the delicate skin on the vulva or the lining of the vagina, especially if you are allergic to perfumes. Some moisturizers contain a sugary preservative called glycerin. In some women, especially those with diabetes, glycerin may increase the risk of a vaginal infection.

Parabens are another kind of preservative. They are similar to phytoestrogens and are banned in some European countries. In the United States, the FDA believes they are safe in low levels. You can find moisturizers without them, however.

You can buy vaginal moisturizers in big discount drugstores or websites. A couple of new moisturizers have their own websites. The table below gives you an idea of what is available. The costs are rough estimates.

Name of Product	Description	Perfume-free	Parabens-free	Glycerine-free	pH Balanced	Cost per Month
Replens	Gel in tampon applicator; clings to vaginal lining to keep moist	Yes	No	No	Yes	\$14
Me Again	Gel in tampon applicator that keeps vaginal lining moist	Yes	No	Yes	No	\$18
K-Y Liquibeads	Oval tablets that dissolve in vagina	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	\$26
Hyalogyn	Gel in tampon applicator containing hyaluronic acid, a natural source of moisture	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	\$40
Luvana	Prebiotic gel in tampon applicator that moisturizes, helps grow healthy bacteria and prevents infections	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	\$40
Neogyn	Cream to sooth vulva dryness and pain, contains cutaneous lysate, a healing ingredient	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	\$40

Replens has been around the longest and creates a moist film that clings to the vaginal lining. Luvena makes the pH and other conditions right for healthy bacteria to grow. Hyalo Gyn contains hyaluronic acid, a chemical that works in the body to help cells stay moist. We do not yet know if one moisturizer works better than another.

## Vaginal Lubricants

A key to having pain-free sex is to use a vaginal moisturizer regularly and then, when you are ready to have sexual activity, add a water-based or silicon-based vaginal lubricant. Unlike the old, gloppy gels, they are clear, thin liquids that look and feel like a woman's own wetness. As with a vaginal moisturizer, look for a lubricant that is not perfumed and does not contain oils or petroleum jelly. You also can find lubricants that are free of glycerin or parabens and that try to restore the vagina to a slightly acidic pH.

Water- or silicone-based lubricants work well. Silicone-based lubricants are more expensive, but you usually need to use less each time and they stay effective longer. However, silicone-based lubricants can stain sheets or underwear. Some sex toys made of silicone will be damaged if you use a silicone-based lubricant on them. Water-based lubricants always are safe to use with latex condoms or sex toys.

You can find many different lubricants in any drugstore, a big discount store or on the Internet. These lubricants do not contain female hormones. Waterbased lubricants that meet all of the conditions just described include Astroglide Glycerin and Parabens Free, Oceanus Naturals Personal Lubricant, Liquid Goddess Natural Lubricant, and Yes Water-based Organic Lubricant. For silicone-based lubricant, ID Millenium, Pjur for Women Bodyglide and Pjur Eros are unscented.

## How to Get the Most Out of a Lubricant

Talk to your partner about using a lubricant. You may worry that your partner will think a lubricant is not natural. Your lubrication now is not linked to your desire for sex or your excitement. You need the lubricant to keep sex enjoyable.

Do not try to hide using a lubricant by putting it on in secret before sex. Even the best lubricants dry out after a few minutes. Keep your lubricant next to the bed so you can take a break to put more on when you need it.

Make the lubricant part of your love-making. As you begin sexual touching, you and your partner should spread the lubricant gently around your clitoris and vaginal entrance. If your sexual partner is a man, you can spread lubricant on the head of his penis when you are caressing him. When both partners' skin is lubricated, penetration is much easier. Lesbian couples use many different kinds of lovemaking. If you enjoy having something inside your vagina, whether it is a finger or sex toy, be sure to lubricate it well.

## Avoiding Tense Pelvic Floor Muscles

Once a woman has had pain with sex, she may tense the muscles around her vaginal entrance out of fear that it will happen again. You can learn how to tense and relax these muscles at will, so that you can stay loose during penetration for sexual activity.

The pelvic floor muscles form a kind of figure eight, circling the anus, vaginal entrance and the opening of the urethra, where urine comes out. You can squeeze and relax your pelvic floor muscles once you know how to find them. When you urinate, notice the squeezing motion you use when you want to shut off the flow of urine. Squeeze to stop your urine before your bladder is empty. Relax and let the rest of the urine flow out.

Try the same squeeze when you are not urinating, but just sitting or lying comfortably. Can you feel a tensing at the entrance of your vagina? You should not be squeezing your whole stomach or your thighs, or holding your breath. Once you have learned what it feels like to tense and relax your muscles, it is best not to stop and start your urine flow as an ongoing way of practicing.

Practice a series of muscle squeezes twice a day. You can do this anytime, watching TV, in the shower or just sitting on the couch. The squeezes are called Kegel exercises, and you may have learned them in childbirth classes. Strengthening the pelvic floor muscle can help if you tend to lose a little urine when you sneeze or exercise.

You can practice Kegels in several ways. This method is easy to remember:

- Squeeze your pelvic muscle as tightly as you can for a count of 3.
- Then let it relax and go loose, as fully as you can.
- Do 10 Kegels in a row. It takes only a couple of minutes to do 10 Kegels, but practicing can help you learn to feel the difference between tension and relaxation in your pelvic muscle.

You can learn to relax your pelvic muscles during penetration for intercourse. Ask your partner to let you guide his penis into your vaginal opening. It helps to use a position where you are in control—for example, with you kneeling above your partner. Tense your pelvic muscle, and then let it relax before you let your partner's penis start entering your vagina. Go gradually, tensing and relaxing your pelvic muscle as needed, so that penetration does not feel tight or painful.

Another way to practice relaxing your pelvic muscle is to use a vaginal dilator. These are rounded tubes made of silicon (or sometimes plastic) of different sizes that a woman can use to stretch her vagina. You can buy dilators on the Internet without a prescription, but you always should ask your physician first before using a dilator.

If you use a dilator, make sure to cover the tip with a water-based vaginal lubricant. A dilator should be inserted gently and gradually, tensing and relaxing your pelvic muscles as needed, and never forced into the vagina.

### **Keeping Vaginal Tissues in Shape**

When a woman becomes sexually aroused, or even if she uses a vaginal dilator to stretch her vagina, blood flows into the vaginal walls and cells that produce moisture. This blood carries fresh oxygen. If a woman is not sexually active, especially after menopause, the tiny blood vessels in the vagina and vulva may not stay healthy.

We recommend that women taking an AI either have sexual activity or use a vaginal dilator at least twice a week. We do not know yet if this will prevent damage to the vagina, but it is worth a try.

### **If Pain Is Still a Problem**

If you try all of the suggestions in this booklet but still are having pain during sex, ask your oncology team for a referral to a gynecologist or sexual counselor. Some women may need to practice muscle relaxation with vaginal dilators or can see a physical therapist who specializes in pelvic pain.

*Resource adapted from original document created by Leslie R. Schover, PhD, at MD Anderson Cancer Center.*