

Penile Rehabilitation After Radiation Therapy

What is penile rehabilitation?

The goal of penile rehabilitation is to keep your penis healthy and to help you maintain erections for sexual activity. You can do penile rehabilitation by making an erection at least 3 times per week by doing penile exercises or by having sexual activity.

We do not know exactly how penile rehabilitation works. We think it helps by stretching the tissue in your penis. This allows more blood to flow into the penis and keeping the tissue healthy.

If you stop having natural erections, you may want to start penile rehabilitation. The earlier you start penile rehabilitation, the more likely you will be able to have erections after treatment.

How can I do penile rehabilitation?

- **Massage:** massaging your penis every day can help keep the tissue healthy and help with sexual feelings. You can massage your penis any time you are in the shower or bath to help with blood flow.
- **Pills:** also called PDE5 inhibitors. These can help more blood flow into your penis.
- **Vacuum therapy:** a penile vacuum erection device (VED) can help you form erections for sexual activities and do exercises which keep the tissue healthy. You can do exercises with the VED once a day.
- **Suppositories or gels:** a pellet called MUSE, or a gel, is put into your urethra to help form erections. MUSE or gels should only be used once every 24 hours and no more than 3 times per week.
- **Penile injections:** also called intracavernosal injection therapy. Penile injections will make more blood flow into your penis. This is usually the most successful treatment for erectile dysfunction (difficulty forming or keeping an erection). You should only use these injections once every 24 hours and no more than 3 times per week.

You can use any of these treatments to create erections for sexual activity.

How does my body make an erection?

Erections are complex and need several things to work properly.

In the penis, there are 3 tubes of spongy tissue. The bottom tube is called the corpus spongiosum, which has the urethra (the tube where your pee exits your body). The other two tubes, called the corpora cavernosa, form erections.

To have an erection, you need:

- Healthy tissue in your penis
- Good blood flow
- Nerves that are working well
- The ability to keep blood in your penis

An erection happens in four steps:

1. **Sexual Arousal:** you start feeling sexually excited. This may happen when you think sexual thoughts or feel pleasurable sensations.

2. **More Blood Flows:** your brain sends a signal along a nerve to your penis, telling the muscle to relax. This allows more blood to flow inside the tissue in your penis.
3. **Erection Forms:** as more blood flows into your penis, an erection will start to form.
4. **Erection Maintained:** the blood is trapped in your penis, which maintains your erection.

How can radiation therapy change my erections?

Radiation treatment for prostate cancer can damage the nerves and blood vessels that help form erections.

This damage may occur slowly and cause erectile dysfunction. Without regular erections, the tissue in the penis can become less healthy over time. This is because less blood (and less oxygen) comes into the penis. This may cause damage to the tissue in the penis.

Just like the rest of our body, the penis needs to be exercised regularly to stay healthy. Erections exercise your penis.

When will I see changes in my erections?

The tissue in your penis can become less healthy after starting radiation. This depends on many things:

- how well you had erections before radiation
- your age
- other health issues you may have, like diabetes
- if radiation damaged any of your erectile nerves

If you need more information about penile rehabilitation, please call your radiation oncologist or the sexual health clinician.



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