

Vacuum Pumps - Patient Education Sheet

Vacuum pumps have been commercially available since 1985 and consist of a clear plastic cylinder and a hand or battery-operated pump. They have been often considered a gimmick but are now being used increasingly because they are cheap, non-invasive and an easy way to exercise the penis, and for some couples a useful device to keep the penis engorged for sexual intercourse.

Studies suggest that early usage of this device decreases the loss of stretched penile length after a Radical Prostatectomy (RP) and increases the chance of early erectile recovery sufficient for vaginal intercourse. (Wang R. Penile rehabilitation after radical prostatectomy: where do we stand and where are we going? J Sex Med. 2007;4(4 Pt 2):1085-1097.)

Vacuum Pumps in Erectile Rehabilitation

Vacuum pumps are mechanical devices that draw blood to the penis. With regular use, you could consider it “physiotherapy for the penis”, “taking your penis to the gym” and it can also be used to get an erection for intercourse. If you are planning to use a vacuum pump, we would encourage you to purchase a pump made from a reputable manufacturer.

The urethra is drawn into the pelvis and sutured to the bladder, so all patients report a degree of shortening, approximately 1cm. Pump is useful to preserve penile length.

You can start using the vacuum pump 4 weeks post operatively. You can use the pump as an exercise 3 days a week and use it to engorge the penis for 30 seconds, three times in the one session. This whole procedure should take between 5 and 10 mins. We suggest patients start the pump at 4 – 8 weeks. If perineal pain occurs, then it is useful to wait another week.

Urine leakage is very common with the pump. Void before using. For rehabilitation we recommend a minimum of three times a week. Pump until the penis lifts (approximately 50-60% of your usual erection), keep it there for 30 seconds and then release the vacuum. Repeat this process three times.

Make sure you use water soluble lubricant.

Note: More is not better. Don't think that if you pump it up harder it will be better. Think of going to the gym and lifting weights to get your biceps in shape. It is more effective to lift a 5kg weight 10 times than a 50kg weight once! This is the same. Consistency is the key. Bigger/harder is not better when doing penile rehabilitation.

Instructions for using the vacuum pump for intercourse

Each manufacturer will include instructions for use with the pump, and in the case of some producers, an educational DVD is also available. The flaccid penis is placed in the cylinder and an air-tight seal is obtained with lubricating gel. A partial vacuum is created by pumping air out from inside the cylinder.

The penis then becomes filled with blood, and when hard enough for intercourse, a plastic ring is slipped from the end of the cylinder and around the base of the penis. This traps blood in the penis and the erection can be safely maintained for up to 30 minutes. Some people will use two constriction rings to obtain a stronger and better erection.

The device is effective in 90% of men, but it might take a couple of weeks for you to learn how to use it properly. When you've got it right, it takes about 3 minutes for you to get a usable erection.

The pumps that in our opinion work the best are the Vaculect and the Bathmate.

There are videos about these pumps on the RS Health YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6SkzSkveDXzqUuA1ZONDEg>

A Touchy Subject YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/c/ATouchySubject>

Problems with the Vacuum Pump

Prior to the return of urinary control after surgery, securing an adequate seal with a vacuum pump can be tricky. In addition, urinary leakage can increase during use of the pump.

The pump works best in men with a stable relationship, as it can be less attractive to single men and for those with significant psychological difficulties. Some partners have reported the penis feels a little colder than normal when a pump is used, but most indicate a satisfactory result.

However, there are very few issues with using the pump overall and aside from bruising, no serious complications have been reported with reputable brands.

Don't use it for more than 30 minutes, as it can become uncomfortable and do damage.