

CHOOSING AND OBTAINING A VACUUM PUMP

After my radical prostatectomy in January 2013 I decided that I would use a vacuum pump, which is a device recommended for penile rehabilitation following a radical prostatectomy. In this document I will describe how I arrived at my decision on which pump to obtain, and then how I obtained my chosen device. I also give some details of the product that I obtained.

WHAT IS A VACUUM PUMP?

The vacuum pump is also known as a 'vacuum erection pump', 'penis vacuum pump' or 'vacuum erection device (VED)'.

A pump system consists of a cylinder that is placed over the penis and is attached to a vacuum pump. The pump is operated to create a vacuum in the cylinder, which induces an erection in the penis. Professional pump kits contain rubber rings known as 'maintenance' or 'erection' or 'constriction' rings. A ring is placed at the base of the cylinder before the cylinder is placed onto the penis. When an erection has been induced the ring is slid off the cylinder and onto the base of the penis, which maintains the erection after the vacuum is released and the cylinder is removed. The sliding of the ring off the cylinder is sometimes referred to as a 'transfer'. Rings should be worn for not more than 30 minutes at a time.

WHY USE A VACUUM PUMP?

A vacuum pump can be used following a radical prostatectomy, to help to overcome some side effects. The pump induces erections and so increases the blood flow within the penis, and exercises muscles, and so can help in these ways:

- A quicker return of normal erections
- Use of maintenance rings will retain an erection after removal of the cylinder, enabling sexual activities
- Prevention of penile shortening (sometimes referred to as retraction). This is a phenomenon described in an article at: <http://myprostatedoc.blogspot.co.uk/2011/06/shortening-of-penis-after-prostatectomy.html>. Regular use of a pump can prevent the phenomenon from occurring, and pumps can reverse temporary shortening. Temporary shortening can become permanent if a penis does not have erections for a prolonged period – possibly after about two years.

Please note that an RPCSG group member has written a personal account of using a pump, that is available from the RPCSG (Reading Prostate Cancer Support Group) support group archives in the web site <http://www.rpcsg.org.uk>. The document is titled 'The astonishing potency of a vacuum'.

STEP 1 – CHOOSE A PRODUCT

I used the internet and sites such as Ebay to research available products. It soon became obvious that there are two classes of pump for sale: There are those that do not contain any rings and thus seem to be aimed at people who just want to attempt to increase the size of their erect member. I will refer to this class as 'novelty' and they cost from as little as £10. The other class is the 'professional' type, usually costing around £150-£300 (if purchased privately) and including

maintenance rings and cushioning inserts, and aimed at people who want to rehabilitate the penis following surgery or injury, or suffer from erectile dysfunction.

If you just want a pump to exercise the penis, then a novelty product without any rings could possibly meet your needs, but remember that usually you only get what you pay for and a very cheap product may be disappointing. Beware, as I have seen some suppliers charging outrageously high prices for products that others are selling much cheaper.

Some characteristics to bear in mind when choosing a pump are:

- The cylinder diameter – ideally a product should be available in a range of cylinder diameters so that you can choose an appropriate size. Diameters that are excessively small or excessively large could be uncomfortable.
- Inserts – these are rubber plugs with a central hole that fit into the end of a cylinder, making for greater comfort and easier vacuum sealing.
- Rings – professional pumps usually contain a variety of ring sizes (tensions).
- Pump quality – very cheap products usually have just a squeeze bulb that may not be adequate.
- Some pumps are integral with the cylinder, others are remote and attach via a vacuum pipe.
- Most pumps are for single handed operation but a few are for two handed operation.
- Vacuum limiter – some pumps have a limiter fitted during manufacture to prevent the vacuum rising above a safe pre-set level.
- Vacuum gauge – where fitted, indicates of the extent of vacuum created.
- Some products have a battery operated vacuum pump – may be useful for people with limited manual dexterity.

You should be able to find several professional pumps by searching the internet, and sites such as Ebay. You can also contact your GP, who may be able to advise on suppliers that are approved by the Health Authorities.

MY CHOICE OF PRODUCT

I decided to use the SomaCorrect Xtra device, as it is versatile with three cylinders, has two inserts, an extensive range of rings, and an integral pump. This is available from the UK distributor iMEDicare, their web site is: <http://www.iMEDicare.eu/main.html>

I thought that the web site was somewhat confusing on dimensions, and I made two phone calls to them at various times. The following is the information that I found concerning the three products:

SomaCorrect Xtra:

Contains three cylinders of different diameters, labelled A, B and C, and each cylinder tapers slightly, narrower at the pump end. The C cylinder is the largest diameter and is 205mm in length. It connects to the pump by a turn-to-lock mechanism. The B cylinder slides inside the C cylinder, and the A cylinder fits inside the B cylinder. There are two rubber inserts. The larger fits into the mouth of the C cylinder, and the smaller insert fits inside the larger insert. The kit contains 3 sets of rings, which are known as, in

increasing tensions, Select, Ultimate and Ultra. Each set contains three rings of differing tensions. The kit also contains a lower tension ring series known as 'SureEase' which are regarded as 'practise' rings and are unlikely to be effective for most men.

You have a choice of which cylinders, inserts and rings to use, and experimentation is needed to find your most suitable combinations.

I measured my cylinder internal diameters at the open end (furthest from the pump) of the A, B and C cylinders at 37, 43 and 54mm. The larger insert has a hole diameter of 46mm and the smaller insert hole is of diameter 37mm. These diameters are designed so that the hole in the larger insert approximately matches the internal diameter of the B cylinder, and the hole diameter of the smaller insert approximately matches the internal diameter of the A cylinder.

iMEDicare said that this product is suitable for 95% of clients and is the 'default' product.

SomaResponse II:

This product is the same as the Correct Xtra above, but with fewer parts, and seems to be aimed at penises that are at the top end of the diameter range. The SomaResponse II kit contains one cylinder which is the size C cylinder as used in the Correct Xtra. It has the same two inserts as the Correct Xtra but has only rings of the lowest two tension ranges, the SureEase and Select series. I suggest that anyone considering obtaining the SomaResponse II could consider the Correct Xtra instead, as you would then have more versatility from the bigger range of cylinders and rings, but I would advise first discussing this with iMedicare.

SomaResponse II XL:

This product is for extra-wide penile diameters only, and contains one cylinder that according to the brochure, has a diameter of 64mm, and one insert. The length of the cylinder is 205mm, but I believe that the battery operated version of the Response II XL has a longer cylinder of 285mm. The range of rings is the same as for the Response II.

STEP 2 – OBTAIN THE DEVICE

Included with each Soma system, is a free consultation with one of their medical representatives, either in a private consulting room at a hospital, or at your home. At the visit you will be advised of how to use the product, and advised on which of the three products is most suitable for you. The normal process is that you contact the UK supplier iMEDicare to arrange a visit by one of their representatives before obtaining the device. Or if you know which Soma product you require, you can do as I did, and order the product first and then have the visit. The visit is of course, not compulsory.

Whichever pump supplier you have chosen, visit your GP and ask for a prescription for your chosen device. You should be given an FP10 prescription (the normal prescription).

There is a scheme called the SLS (Selected List Scheme) that lists ailments that entitle a patient to treatments available under prescription and this includes vacuum pumps after prostate treatments. The letters SLS must appear on the prescription. It may help if you tell your GP of the make and model of the pump that you require, so that it can appear on the prescription.

Take your FP10 prescription to a chemist or pharmacy and if necessary give them the detail of the product that you require and a preferred supplier, and they will place the order. The supplier will mail the pump to the chemist or pharmacy and you then collect it

MY EXPERIENCE OF OBTAINING THE PRODUCT.

When I asked my GP for a prescription, she said that it was not her job to prescribe such a device, that she had never prescribed one before, and that I would have to obtain one via the hospital. The hospital said they can no longer prescribe products for erectile dysfunction purposes, and that I would have to go to my GP for it! The consultant said that he would write to my GP with a recommendation that I have a pump.

The consultant's letter advised my GP to seek an exemption from the CGC (Clinical Guidance Group), as thanks to these times of austerity, the CGC has the power to block the provision of pumps at cost to the NHS. Had they blocked it, I would have been given a private prescription, for which I would pay myself, the cost being £207 (excluding VAT, which is not applicable to pumps following prostate treatment).

About two weeks later I received a call from the surgery to say that a prescription was awaiting my collection. On collection I found that it was an FP10 form, and because I am over 60, it would be at no cost to me.

During my previous call to iMEDicare, I had been advised not to take an FP10 prescription to a large chemist, as they sometimes batch up prescriptions before placing the order, and then may be slow in advising a customer of its arrival. I took the prescription to a small local pharmacy in Wokingham on a Friday afternoon – they immediately telephoned iMEDicare to ensure a stock, and I received a phone call at home on the following Monday morning from the pharmacy to say that the device had arrived 30 minutes ago, and I could collect it. Service does not get any better than that.

I then contacted iMEDicare to arrange a visit, which they said would be at my home, with Darren Breen who is an iMEDicare area adviser. On arrival Darren was surprised to find that I already had the pump, as the normal process is to make an advisory visit to a client before a product is obtained. This turned out to be not a problem, as Darren said that the SomaCorrect Xtra is suitable for 95% of men. Darren explained the usage of the device and took my completed registration form (for the guarantee) to his office. He gave me some hints as follows:

- Before starting the pumping action, use one hand to pull the scrotum and testicles down and do not let go until the ring(s) are in place. This is to prevent the vacuum from drawing excessive scrotal skin into the cylinder.
- To transfer the rings, do not use the hand holding the scrotum – use the other hand that was used for pumping. This means that you may have to support the end of the cylinder with something, depending on your position. This is not mentioned in the manual, and the instructional DVD that is supplied with the kit shows the user not holding the scrotum at all, and using the free hand to transfer the ring.
- The manual says that the rings in the Select and Ultra series have to be initially vigorously stretched before use. Darren advised that this is a one-off action before the first use, in which you grab the rings by the tabs and

repeatedly (about 10 times) pull them as far apart as possible, but this seems to be possible only by a couple of inches.

- It is preferable to handle the rings by using the tabs. If using two fingers inside the ring for any reason, do not pull at right angles to the tabs, as this will stress the rings along the mould lines. If you need to stretch the rings using two fingers inside the ring, the fingers should be placed so that they are in line with the tabs.
- Darren said that the SureEase rings (the ones with four finger holes) will probably not maintain an erection for most people. He advised trying the lowest tension ring of each series, and if necessary try the next ring of increased tension in the series until you find a ring that adequately maintains an erection. He said that the rings most likely to succeed are the middle size (size #5) of the Select and Ultra rings, and the middle and tightest sizes (sizes Y and X) of the silicone rings (Ultimate series). I found that the ring of the size X (the tightest) of the Ultimate series split at the middle of a tab, after only about four usages.

LUBRICANT

The use of a lubricant can be very helpful, and in the case of a vacuum pump it can help to create an air tight seal at the base. Most pumps are supplied with some lubricant, but I believe that additional lubricant cannot be obtained on prescription. It is however, relatively inexpensive and there are dozens of suppliers. The supplier of your vacuum pump will almost certainly sell additional lubricant.

There are three types of lubricant: water based, oil based, and silicone based. Most pump manufacturers recommend only the water based type, as the other two types can damage other products, particularly those made of rubber or silicone. They may also cause damage to the rings or other components of the pump.

Another aspect to be aware of is a group of ingredients known as parabens (e.g. propylparaben, sodium methylparaben). Parabens are ingredients in some lubricants, and I advise you to read about the possible effects of parabens, before deciding to purchase a lubricant containing it. Also, most lubricants contain glycerine, and if you have an allergy to this then you can find some lubricants that are glycerine free.

REPLACEMENT RINGS

The rings will eventually need to be replaced, because of stretching, breaking or other deterioration. I believe that rings can be obtained on prescription, but I have not yet tried this method.

Rings from iMedicare can be purchased in sets of three rings (in 2013 the cost was £29.99 for Select series, and £34.00 for Ultimate and Ultra series). Each series can be purchased as either a set of three differing sizes (as provided with the pump as received), or all three rings can be of one size, so you must make sure that the order specifies precisely which rings are required, as the default order is a set of three rings of differing sizes. I was told by iMedicare that the typical life of a ring is between 30 and 50 usages.

There are several other manufacturers of rings, but I would advise the use only of the professional type that are designed to be used with cylinders. Such rings have a tab on either side of the ring, and this makes the handling and removal of the ring much easier. The suppliers of pumps should sell replacement rings. One

such supplier is Farnhurst, and details and an order form can be found on their website. I bought a set of five of their rings of different sizes at a price of £20, and their internal diameters are approximately 10, 12, 13, 16, and 20 mm. I had to return a declaration form, otherwise an additional charge for VAT would have been made. The Farnhurst rings have thicker walls than the iMedicare rings, and are more stretchy and so a little easier to remove.

SUMMARY

I believe that using a vacuum pump has helped to reverse a slight penile retraction that I noticed soon after surgery.

On first receiving the product, I could not believe that the tight rings could ever expand to fit onto the base of the outer cylinder. I applied the ring stretching as advised, then was able to install the rings on the C cylinder after some practice. I found that the best technique is to stand the cylinder on the floor without the pump. Place the loading cone onto the cylinder, apply a little lubricant, hold each tab tightly and in a fairly swift and smooth motion, pull the tabs outwards and downwards over the cone until the ring has cleared the cone and is on the base of the cylinder. If I hesitate at the moment that the ring is at the junction of the cone and cylinder, the ring can create a gap and drop into it, by pushing one side of the loading cone upwards. I then have to remove the cone and try again.

Disclaimer

This document is an account of personal experiences and is not a recommendation or preference for any supplier of a product mentioned. There are many other suppliers of the products mentioned or their equivalents.