

THE ASTONISHING POTENCY OF A VACUUM

(Anonymous)

If you have become fully or partially impotent as a result of prostate treatment or for some other reason, there are several ways of getting back to something like normality (given a sympathetic and encouraging partner). One of them is to apply a vacuum pump designed for the purpose. Below is an encouraging account of my experiences with a pump, including some advice that you won't find in the instructions that come with it. Of course everyone is different, but what I found to help me may help you.

First, you must be certain that you have recovered sufficiently from your treatment, especially if this was surgery. Then it is worth making an appointment for advice at the Royal Berks Hospital. Finally, having chosen a particular vacuum pump, or another solution to the problem, you can (as a prostate or other patient) get it on prescription from your GP.

GETTING ADVICE: The man I saw at the RBH was Dr Alan Tang, at what's called the Andrology Clinic. The easiest way to fix an appointment is to ask your GP to make one for you through their "Choose & Book" facility. It's quite normal for your partner to attend the clinic with you. Dr Tang explained to us that the choice lay mainly between a vacuum pump, and the application of a drug (alprostadil) either by self-injection or by the insertion of a pellet, each time. I much preferred the idea of a pump, and so he showed us one or two and handed over leaflets covering several different brands.

He also confirmed what other medics say, which is that it's worth taking a standard dose of Viagra, Cialis or Levitra regularly too (on prescription), both for this particular problem and to aid blood flow generally to the nerves and muscles in the area.

It's stated by the manufacturers that regular use of a pump is beneficial anyway for the penis, and particularly in aiding a return to normal functioning, assuming this is going to be possible at all for you.

CHOICE OF PUMP: I looked at information on half-a-dozen different pumps, and made my choice — the SOMA Correct Xtra from iMedicare (see www.imedicare.eu or phone 0208 207 5627). None of the others seemed to possess all these features of the SOMA kit: a one-handed pump action, a range of tube diameters, and a wide variety of elastic rings (for maintaining the erection). My account below refers only to this kit. Surprisingly, my GP said he had never prescribed a pump before, but he soon found this one on his system, and I had it within a couple of days.

If your first impression is that this is a complicated, mechanical and even embarrassing way of achieving what may have been spontaneous before, try not to be put off! Yes, it will take some practice and experimentation (with the different size options) to get good results, but these will come easily and quickly in the end, particularly if you note some of my comments. At least the current printed user-guide (labelled Rev.4/2012 on the back) is an improvement on the one I was supplied with in 2010. Note that the guide also covers the simple Response II System (at least on p 1 & 2, which you can ignore).

THE KIT: This consists of

- hand-lever pump unit (unhelpfully called a "Negative Pressure Device" in the guide)
- three plastic cylinders in different diameters
- two sizes of rubber sealing gasket (called "Cushion Insert")
- five different types of elastic ring (called "Tension System"), each in several sizes
- cone for loading the stronger types of ring on to the cylinder
- tube of gel lubricant
- travel bag
- printed guide.

[There is an option to order a battery-powered pump unit instead, but I think this would give you less control over what's happening, especially if the battery goes flat on you!].

EASY STAGES: As the instructions say, you should take time (possibly in private) to get used to the kit. The idea is that you first establish which diameters of cylinder and gasket suit you best, then practise just producing an erection, and then experiment with applying the various rings to hold it — until you find one (or a combination of two) that will enable you to try it for real. It took me a week or two (or three) to optimize things, including pauses for thought about what to do next. At least you will have the benefit of my solutions to the problems I met.

For example, my recommendation is that you ignore Step Two on p4 of the guide and use only the large C cylinder (because for the purposes of overcoming simple ED, the more space the cylinder offers the better). Also, use both gaskets to start with, as shown on p5. You can decide which one best suits your own diameter later.

APPLYING THE VACUUM: The essential thing is to obtain a good seal between the gasket and your skin. So first of all, put the two gaskets together, slide them over the penis and see where they “land”. Then, with care, trim or thin out the pubic hair in this circular region (and repeat every few weeks).

Let me now rewrite (and rearrange) the other instructions on p6, in order to describe the way I find it best to do things:

1) Assemble the pump to one end of the C cylinder and the large gasket to the other.

2) Smear a fingerful of the gel on to the face of the small gasket — but not everywhere else described in the guide, as this isn't necessary with the large cylinder (for me anyway).

3) Slide the gasket over the penis and hold it in place, while pulling the penis gently forwards to provide a good amount of skin for when it expands.

4) Apply the cylinder over the penis so that the two gaskets mate, then feel around them to pull out any hairs that have become trapped between them. It's important to be standing up, and to have the cylinder pointing downwards at an angle.

5) Holding the cylinder firmly against you, give it an energetic vertical shake (at your end) to straighten out the penis inside. If this doesn't

happen, then separate the gaskets, pull the penis forwards and try again — otherwise you will not arrive at a good erection (or so I found).

If you compare the above with the printed instructions, you may guess that I think these are not very satisfactory (and the ones in my original guide even less so)! Anyway, one way or another you should now be ready to apply vacuum by operating the pump lever. It will take a few strokes, and some pressing of the kit on to you (to maintain the seal), before you notice the first results. Once there's a vacuum, you won't need to press hard, just keep the cylinder supported.

Now just practise pumping, a few strokes at a time, to get used to it (and to get over the surprise at what can be achieved!). At any time you may press the button to let the air in again, maybe give the tube a shake as in (5) above, and then resume pumping: this can improve the end result. As you approach full size, which you should be able to tell from the sensation, pump very cautiously — or not at all, just waiting for a little more expansion. (If instead you see a contraction, then you don't have a good enough seal yet, between gasket and skin.)

[If, at full size, you feel that the small gasket has become quite a tight fit around the base of the penis, then you could go back to square one and try doing without that gasket, putting the gel on to the large gasket instead and then applying it first. But it's not critical to get the choice right, at this stage.]

[Whether you're using one gasket or both, you may find that when the penis is at full size, (a) it seems a bit short of skin, or (b) additional skin & 'tissue' has entered the cylinder through the gasket. You could let the air back in, remove the cylinder (leaving the gasket still in place against you) and try pulling the skin a little (a) forwards or (b) backwards, through the gasket.]

Really, unless there's actual discomfort, none of the above in brackets is anything to worry much about yet — just keep practising (every day) with the pump, until you are confident about producing an erection within a couple of minutes or so. Then it's time to investigate the elastic rings that will maintain it for you.

APPLYING A RING: First some general comments — why on earth are the rings called “tension systems” in the guide? And why are there so many types & sizes to choose from? At least you’re sure to find one (or else a combination of two) that exactly suits you! Page 12 of the guide shows them in order of increasing stiffness. But it isn’t explained clearly (on p9 & 10) that the rings also fall into two groups:

A) Surefit & SureEase, which can be stretched on to the end of the cylinder by hand (p9),

B) Sure Release, Ultra & Select, which must be slid on to the cylinder by means of the cone provided (p10).

Let’s suppose you have selected a ring, as described opposite, to try out. I would say you’re better sitting down with the cylinder (moulded end) pressed into your lap, rather than held upright as shown on p9 — whether it’s an A ring (by hand) or a B (by cone) that you’re applying. Getting the ring on to the cylinder and then into the right position just at the end (as in lower diagram on p10) will soon come easily, after a bit of practice as the guide says on p9 and p10. Do try to avoid catching the ring on the end of the cylinder: this could easily start a tear in it.

Next, you turn the cylinder around, and set about producing an erection exactly as you’ve already practised (see previous page). Then you flip the ring off the end of the cylinder and on to the penis ... though this is not quite as easy as it may seem from the guide, because you have to make the ring jump the gasket, en route. Try the “C” method (p10) if you like, but what I recommend instead is that you apply a pinch, between a thumb on the face of the gasket and a finger behind the ring, and get the latter starting to slide over the gasket that way — while holding the cylinder against you with the other hand.

There might be slight discomfort as the ring lands on the penis, but it won’t last (unless maybe the ring is too tight). Then let air back into the cylinder and pull it away, with the gaskets. If the small gasket won’t shift easily, separate it from the large one and then slide it off on its own, easing the skin back past it (maybe applying a little gel). If it’s really stuck on you, now’s the time to decide that this gasket is probably too small, and to use just the large one in future. (To remove the small one this time, of course, just stretch the ring to reduce the erection.)

With only the ring now in place, you might find (rather as I mentioned on page 2) that either you are “short of skin”, or else there’s extra skin & tissue in front of the ring where you don’t really want it. This shouldn’t be a problem (even as described on p8 of the guide): just ease the skin a little way through the ring, forward or backward as required.

BUT WHICH RING? Now you know the procedure for applying a ring, here’s the strategy for choosing one to suit you: simply work down the picture-list on p12 of the guide, trying the largest size of each type first. Initially you want to get practice in flipping a ring on to the penis, without worrying about whether it’s going to be tight enough. Though once you’re used to doing this, you won’t want to waste time trying a ring that you guess will be too weak to hold the erection.

The ideal ring is one that just holds it indefinitely (well, say for 15 minutes) without causing discomfort. Except ... this ring may turn out to be not quite strong enough for later on when there is “more happening”! In which case, move on to the next stronger ring — or else combine the first one with a weaker ring. I’m not referring here to the procedure described on p12 of the guide: I’m saying load first the weak ring and then the strong one together on to the cylinder and then, when the time comes, flip them both off (in reverse order of course).

For what it’s worth, I use the middle Ultra ring combined with the middle Surefit. Anyway, here are some comments on all the different types:

SureEase: these are called ‘practice rings’, but if they work for you, stick to them. They are the easiest to remove afterwards, because you can stretch them wider open from four directions.

SureFit: even the smallest of these gel rings should be comfortable (though unlikely to be strong enough on its own — and it tears easily). This type is especially useful for practising removing any ring that has two tabs, as follows (I suggest): grip each tab with thumb and finger, insert a forefinger under the ring, and stretch it wider open from three directions. Allow the erection to subside a bit, then slide the ring off — maybe applying gel to the skin first.

SureRelease: these don't *have* to be torn apart after use: if you avoid pulling with the finger-holes, they can probably be re-used a few times.

Ultra (translucent) & Select (white): I really can't tell the difference between these types, though Ultra is supposed to be the stronger. For removing the ring after use, see SureFit above.

Once you've established which particular ring(s) suit you, prostate patients and others should be able to obtain further supplies (though not the gel) on prescription. However, to obtain a suitable quantity of just your preferred ring size (rather than a complete set) you will need to ask your pharmacist to order direct from iMedicare on 0208 207 5627, specifying the size as marked on the ring, as well as the type (or code).

MISCELLANEOUS: Although there is much to try out and learn to do, once you have been through it all you really will find the procedure to be quick & easy: a couple of minutes to assemble ring & cylinder first, and then (whenever you feel like it!) about the same time to apply the kit to yourself.

But don't expect to achieve an unsupported horizontal as pictured on p11 of the guide — there's likely to be too much 'pivoting' where the ring grips. Though note the comment on this at the bottom of p16.

You can always reduce the size of an erection slightly, by stretching the ring for a second or two. And according to the guide on p10 (though I've not tried it) you can increase size by keeping the ring on, reapplying the kit with the larger gasket only (or, if that's what you were doing already, the cylinder without a gasket) while tucking the lugs of the ring into it, and pumping gently again.

With the optimum ring in place, I believe that anyone with an incontinence problem will find that it goes away! Mine certainly does.

While I don't suffer from any "redness, irritation or bruising" (p16) as a result of the pumping, I do notice slight red bruising after the event, around the tip of the penis, which disappears within 24 hours. It's as if an erection produced this way makes the penis physically more sensitive to contact.

On the other hand, the various "sensations" seem to be less strong than they were (before my prostate operation). Again perhaps a consequence of this way of producing the erection? I don't know — but certainly not a reason not to try out a vacuum system! You might in addition want either to apply lubrication around the tip of the penis, or to wear a condom, for greater comfort.

By the way, don't overlook something that Lorraine Grover said to the RPCSGroup during a talk: it's not essential to have an erection in order to experience a climax.
