

Vulvar Disease & Care

The vulva is the external part of a woman's genitals. Some common problems that women experience in the area include

- Swelling or infection of the vulva and vagina
- Skin problems due to allergy
- **Vulvar cancer**
- Vulvodynia, or vulvar pain

Symptoms of vulvar problems may include redness, itching, pain, or cracks in the skin.

What is the vulva?

The external female genital area is called the vulva. The outer folds of skin are called the labia majora, and the inner folds are called the labia minora. Within the labia minora is the vestibule.

The vagina and urethra open into the vestibule. On either side of the opening of the urethra are the openings to tiny glands called Skene glands. Two additional glands, called Bartholin glands, are located on either side of the vaginal opening. The clitoris is located at the top of the labia minora. It actually extends deep inside the body. The visible part is the clitoris, which is partially covered by a fold of tissue called the clitoral hood. The perineum is the area between the anus and the vagina.

How do I know if my vulva is normal?

There is a wide range of normal genitalia and the appearance varies from woman to woman. The labia majora can range in width from one fourth of an inch to 2 inches. The labia minora often extend past the labia majora, but it also is normal if they do not. Some women have labia that are uneven in size. All of these differences are normal.

What should I do if I notice changes in my vulvar skin color?

It is a good idea to become familiar with what is usual for your own vulva. If you see changes in the skin color (redness, dark or light colored spots), including moles, or if you have new bumps or painful swelling, itching, or burning that do not go away, you should have a medical exam. Medical exam of vulvar irritation may involve vulvoscopy, which is a microscope to look at the tissues in detail, and may also include vulvospicy, which is a sampling of vulvar tissue for lab testing.

What is vulvar dermatitis?

Vulvar dermatitis happens when the soft folds of skin around the opening of the vagina become red, painful, and itchy. Dermatitis can be caused by heat or wetness or can be a reaction to scented soaps, powders, creams, toilet paper, spermicides, or clothing. Skin conditions such as psoriasis or eczema can also cause dermatitis on the vulva.

What is lichen sclerosus?

Lichen sclerosus is a chronic condition that causes thin, white patches of skin, usually in the vulvar area. Lichen sclerosus can cause discomfort, itching, and easy bruising or tearing of the skin. Treatment is usually topical corticosteroid ointments used to reduce itching and complications.

What does lichen sclerosus look like?

This can look like lumps, ulcers or crusted areas. In areas away from the genital skin, lichen sclerosus looks like small ivory coloured slightly raised areas, which join up to form white patches. After a while the surface of the spots can look like white wrinkled tissue paper.

What makes vulvar irritation worse?

Women with vaginal infections or vulvar conditions often use over-the-counter products to stop itching, burning, or pain. Although for some women these products may be helpful at times, for many women they often don't help and may worsen the pain or itching. Many over-the-counter products for vulvovaginal problems have ingredients that can cause pain. The medicines women buy to treat yeast infections can cause pain or burning, especially the products. Women often scratch or rub when they feel itchy or irritated, and this makes them feel more uncomfortable. Frequent washing with soap and other cleansing products also can increase pain or itching.

What helps or prevents vulvar irritation?

Getting an accurate medical diagnosis of what is causing vulvar irritation is the most important first step. Stopping the use of everything that can worsen pain or itching can help in allowing the skin to heal once you have received proper medical treatment. If you have a vaginal infection or vulvar skin problem, especially one that does not get better easily or keeps coming back, avoiding all things

that might cause pain or itching is an important part of your care. Talk to your health care provider about your specific problem and recommended treatment.

Self-Help Tips for Vulvar Irritation

While you are seeking effective treatment for vulvar pain, here are some coping measures to relieve symptoms and prevent further irritation. Even when your symptoms are under control, these guidelines are recommended as a preventive strategy.

Clothing and Laundry

- Wear white cotton underwear.
- Do not wear pantyhose (wear thigh high or knee high hose instead).
- Wear loose-fitting pants or skirts.
- Remove wet bathing suits and exercise clothing promptly.
- Use dermatologically approved detergent such as Purex or Clear.
- Double-rinse underwear and any other clothing that comes into contact with the vulva.
- Do not use fabric softener on undergarments.

Hygiene

- Use soft, white, unscented toilet paper.
- Use lukewarm or cool sitz baths to relieve burning and irritation.
- Avoid getting shampoo on the vulvar area.
- Do not use bubble bath, feminine hygiene products, or any perfumed creams or soaps.
- Wash the vulva with cool to lukewarm water only.
- Rinse the vulva with water after urination.
- Urinate before the bladder is full.
- Prevent constipation by adding fiber to your diet (if necessary, use a psyllium product such as Metamucil) and drinking at least 8 glasses of water daily.
- Use 100% cotton menstrual pads and tampons.

Sexual intercourse

- Use a water-based lubricant
- Ask your physician for a prescription for a topical anesthetic, e.g., Lidocaine gel 5% (This may sting for the first 3-5 minutes after application.)
- Apply ice or a frozen blue gel pack in one layer of a hand towel and apply to the vulva for 15 minutes to relieve burning after intercourse.
- Urinate (to prevent infection) and rinse vulva with cool water after sexual intercourse.
- Do not use contraceptive creams or spermicides.

Physical Activities

- Avoid exercises that put direct pressure on the vulva such as bicycle riding and horseback riding.
- Limit intense exercises that create a lot of friction in the vulvar area (try lower intensity exercises such as walking).
- Use a frozen gel pack wrapped in a clean thin towel or tee shirt to relieve symptoms after exercise.
- Enroll in an exercise class such as yoga to learn stretching and relaxation exercises.
- Don't swim in highly chlorinated pools.
- Avoid the use of hot tubs.

Everyday Living

- Use a foam rubber donut for long periods of sitting.
- If you must sit all day at work, try to intersperse periods of standing (e.g. rearrange your office so that you can stand while you speak on the phone).
- Learn some relaxation techniques to do during the day ([The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook](#) by Davis, Eshelman and McKay or [The Chronic Pain Control Workbook](#) by Catalano and Hardin are recommended).