

## Department of Genitourinary Medicine

# Patient Information

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# Information

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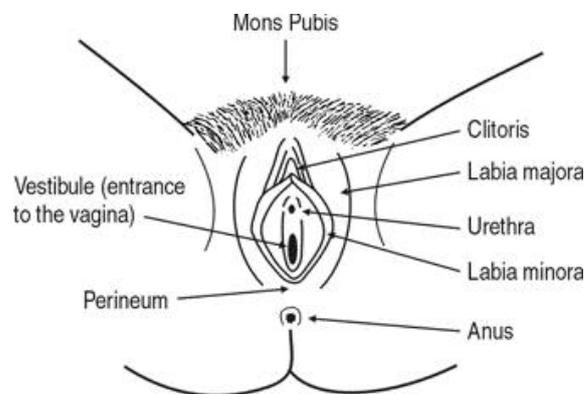
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## Vulval skin care

Many women suffer from vulval soreness and itching. This can be due to skin conditions, such as eczema, infections such as thrush (candidiasis), or just to sensitivity of the skin or nerve cells. This leaflet gives general advice on how to care for your vulval skin.

### What causes vulval skin problems?

The vulva is the name given to the external genital organs of women, which includes the inner and outer “lips” (labia) and clitoris.



The vulval skin is very sensitive, and can react to many beauty products and dyes. It can also be affected by:

- skin conditions, such as eczema, psoriasis and lichen sclerosus
- infections such as thrush and warts
- nerve sensitivity (called vulvodynia)

If you have a diagnosed skin condition, you will usually be given specific treatment for it. However the advice given in this leaflet will be helpful to all women with vulval soreness, itching or sensitivity.

### What should I avoid?

You should avoid all contact of the vulva with:

- soaps, which dry the skin
- perfumed products, such as bubble baths, deodorants, and feminine hygiene wipes, which can irritate the skin
- antiseptics, used in the bath or directly on the skin
- flavoured condoms
- facial moisturisers and body lotions

## How should I wash my vulva?

- Wash the vulval area only once a day. Cleaning too often can dry the skin.
- Wash just with your hand. Avoid using a flannel, as this can scratch the skin.
- Avoid all contact with soaps (even unperfumed soaps such as Simple Soap) as these dry and irritate the skin. Washing the vulva with water only is perfectly adequate.
- Using a moisturiser as a soap substitute can improve the condition of the skin. However you should only use those that are recommended for eczema.
  - We recommend emulsifying ointment; apply it before getting into the bath or shower, and then rinse it off with your fingers after washing the rest of your body.
  - Dermol 500 is a good (and less greasy) alternative, especially if the skin is very inflamed
  - We do not recommend Aqueous cream as it often irritates the vulval skin
- Try to avoid shampoo from coming into contact with the vulval skin. If you cannot wash your hair in the sink, protect the vulva with emulsifying ointment.

## What else can I do?

- Use a bland moisturiser on the vulval skin every night, and throughout the day if you are sore. This can help to relieve symptoms; and more importantly, when you don't have symptoms can prevent them returning.
- We recommend Unguentum M or Dermol 500 but not Aqueous cream as this can irritate
- Use soft, white, non-recycled toilet paper and cotton pads or tampons

## What clothes should I wear?

Tight clothing and man-made materials can cause friction and overheating. Avoid them!

- 100% cotton underwear (some say it should be white) is the best. Avoid thongs and synthetic materials.
- Go without underwear as often as possible — at home in the day, wearing just a skirt, and at night.
- Wear stockings or hold-ups rather than tights.
- Avoid leggings, cycling shorts, and tight jeans, which put pressure on the vulva.

## How should I wash my clothes?

- Avoid detergents which contain dyes, enzymes (these will be called biological) and perfumes. Use one which is non-biological, dermatologically approved, or recommended for babies
- Avoid fabric conditioners, bleach, and tumble-dryer sheets
- Double-rinse underwear and other clothing that comes into contact with the vulva

## Can I exercise?

Yes, but....

- Try to avoid exercises such as cycling or horse riding, which put direct pressure on the vulva. Padded shorts and bicycle seats are available, which can help.
- Limit intense exercises that create a lot of friction in the vulval area
- Avoid swimming in highly chlorinated pools, and avoid hot tubs
- Remove swimming costumes and exercise clothes as soon as possible

- Some women find it helpful to protect the vulva with emulsifying ointment or Vaseline before exercising or swimming.

## What about sex?

Many women with vulval conditions have problems with their sex life. There are several possible reasons for this.

- Pain during sex due to the vulval condition
- Lack of desire to have sex due to pain
- Dryness due to tension and lack of desire
- Involuntary spasm of the vaginal muscles due to anticipation of pain, which further increases pain
- Avoidance of sex due to lack of desire and fear of pain
- Relationship difficulties due to avoidance of sex — which further reduces desire.
- Strategies which can help include
- Use a lubricant before starting to have sex. KY jelly is absorbed very quickly; we recommend trying lubricants such as TLC (Pasante), Sensilube (Durex) and Sylk, which are non-irritant and last longer. These may sometimes be obtained more cheaply and easily from the internet than a pharmacy.
- Replens is a vaginal lubricant that provides moisture for the vagina for up to 3 days
- A topical anaesthetic such as Instillagel may help. Apply this a little while before sex, to allow it to be absorbed so that it numbs you but not your partner, and use additional lubrication as well.
- Don't use flavoured condoms or perfumed lubricants, as these can irritate.
- If it is just the penetration that causes pain, keeping to “outersex” (mutual masturbation and oral sex) until you feel less sore, will reduce tension and avoidance of sexual activity, while ensuring that you and your partner keep close
- If you need more help, speak to your doctor or nurse. You can be referred to a specialist in sexual medicine. They are very experienced in helping people with physical as well as psychological difficulties with sex.

## Where can I get more information?

There are many websites dedicated to vulval conditions. The Vulval Pain Society provides information on vulval conditions, advice and self-help for sufferers, and links to other websites and support groups. <http://vulvalpainsociety.org>

## Other leaflets in this series

The following information leaflets can be obtained from the Department of Genitourinary Medicine:

- [Does sex cause you pain?](#)
- [Recurrent vulvovaginal candidiasis](#)
- [Lichen sclerosus](#)
- [Lichen planus](#)

## Further Information

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