

# Vulvodynia and Vestibulodynia

Vulvodynia is a medical term that means pain in the female genital area (the vulva) when no other cause is identified. Vestibulodynia is the term used for pain around the opening to the vagina (the vestibule - where the openings to the vagina and urethra are) when it is touched or pressure is applied.

## *What are the symptoms of vulvodynia and vestibulodynia?*

Symptoms of vulvodynia include pain in the vulva and occasionally the buttocks and inner thighs. It is typically felt as burning, stinging or raw discomfort and may be constant or intermittent. Symptoms may occur in a small area or can involve the entire vulva.

Symptoms of vestibulodynia include pain that occurs when the vestibule is touched. Some women may experience pain when urinating. The pain is not present all the time however it can last for hours and can prevent penetrative sex altogether.

## *What causes these conditions?*

The exact cause is unknown but the conditions are thought to be caused by over-sensitive nerve endings in the area sending signals which are felt as pain. The conditions may be triggered or made worse by:

- chronic skin conditions
- skin infections such as candidiasis (thrush)
- laser treatment or surgery
- injury
- childbirth
- skin irritation caused by soaps, detergents, douches, panty liners, condoms
- emotional factors (e.g. stress or anxiety)
- tight clothing
- walking and sitting

## *How can these conditions be treated?*

There are various treatments that may be useful and it may be worth trying several methods to see which will best suit you. Treatment can take time. Sometimes symptoms can settle by themselves, although it may take months or sometimes years to do so. The most successful treatment measures include:

- avoiding soaps, bubble baths, shower gels, shampoos and deodorants in the vulval area
- washing with a soap substitute such as aqueous or sorbolene cream will keep your skin hydrated and reduce irritation
- cool compresses or salt water baths
- avoiding tight, synthetic clothing and activities that irritate the area
- seeing a physiotherapist who specialises in women's health for advice regarding pelvic muscle relaxation training
- topical or oral medications to reduce nerve pain

Education and support regarding these conditions can help.

It may be beneficial to:

- discuss the problem openly and bring your partner to appointments
- make sure you are comfortable before trying any penetrative sexual activity
- use water-based lubricant before sex or inserting a tampon
- have a warm relaxing bath when the pain occurs
- see a sex therapist or counsellor to discuss the emotional impacts of this diagnosis and ways to enjoy intimacy without vaginal penetration

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## References

The British Association of Dermatologists (2015) Vulvodynia and vestibulodynia patient information leaflet.

<http://www.bad.org.uk/for-the-public/patient-information-leaflets>

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<http://dermnetnz.org/site-age-specific/vulvar-vestibulitis.html>