



# VULVOVAGINAL DISORDERS

## A PATHWAY TO DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT

### GENERAL VULVAR CARE

While you are seeking effective treatment for vulvovaginal problems, these supportive measures may greatly help you to relieve symptoms and prevent further irritation. Even when your symptoms are under control, these guidelines are recommended as preventive strategies.

#### Clothing and laundry:

- Wear all-cotton underwear or wear microfiber underwear with a cotton crotch. Underwear should never bind. Make sure you are wearing the right size. Avoid thongs completely. Be aware of the pressure from elastic in panties.
- Do not wear pantyhose. Wear thigh high or knee high hose instead.
- Remove wet bathing suits and exercise clothing promptly. Avoid exercise in tight, synthetic clothes. Wash exercise clothing frequently.
- Wear loose-fitting pants or skirts. Avoid jeans whose thick seams can irritate. Avoid tight lycra which hugs the vulva. Take your underwear off when at home and go without underpants. Do not wear underwear to bed. Avoid pajamas that ride up and bind. Wear nightgowns or oversized T shirts.
- Use perfume and dye-free detergents. Tide® (even Tide-Free) contains enzymes that bother some women. All Free and Clear detergent is generally safe. Detergents are not commonly related to vulvovaginal problems, but with persistent symptoms, all possible irritants must be considered.
- Do not use bleach or fabric softener on undergarments. Use dryer balls to soften dried clothing.
- Double-rinse underwear and any other clothing that comes into contact with the vulva if you are highly sensitive.

#### Hygiene:

- Use soft, white, unscented toilet paper.
- Use lukewarm or cool sitz baths to relieve burning or irritation. Follow the baths with patting dry and application of a small amount of Vaseline® petroleum jelly. This is the treatment we call **“soak and seal.”**
- If you are highly sensitive, avoid getting shampoo on the vulvar area.
- Do not use bubble bath, feminine hygiene products, powder, cleansing wipes, or any perfumed creams or soaps. Two products that are recommended are Cetaphil® gentle cleanser and Dove for Sensitive Skin® soap.
- Wash the vulva with cool to lukewarm water only, using your hand or a soft cloth. Do not scrub!
- To remove stool, use plain mineral oil (or petroleum jelly) on soft toilet paper, rather than commercial wet wipes, even the ones made for babies.
- Rinse the vulva with water after urinations if you wish. Blot to dry gently.
- Urinate before the bladder is full.
- Prevent constipation by adding fiber to your diet. If necessary, use a psyllium product such as Metamucil®. Drink at least eight glasses of water a day.
- Use 100% cotton menstrual pads and tampons free of perfumes.
- Avoid the use of daily panty liners. Change underwear as often as necessary to control wetness. Some menstrual pads with “wicking” material on the top surface can be irritating to the skin.

**Sexual intercourse:**

- Use a lubricant, if necessary, but make sure it is water-soluble if condoms are being used, e.g. Astroglide-Free® or SlipperyStuff®. Be aware that some lubricants contain propylene glycol (P.G.) which is irritating to some women. A dab of almond or corn oil is fine if no condoms are used. Oil-based products can break down rubber condoms. For women attempting pregnancy, Preseed ® is recommended. For post-menopausal or lactating women experiencing dryness, Replens® can help as a moisturizer (not lubricant), as can application of Vaseline® after a shower.
- Ask your clinician for a prescription for a topical anesthetic, e.g. lidocaine 5% ointment, which can be put into the vaginal opening for 10-15 minutes, then wiped off prior to intercourse. Lidocaine may sting for a few moments after application, but then will numb the skin. Avoid the clitoris.
- Apply crushed ice or frozen gel packs (lunch box sized) wrapped in one layer of a hand towel to relieve burning after intercourse. Frozen corn or peas in a small sealed plastic bag covered with a cloth mold comfortably to vulvar anatomy.
- Urinate (to prevent infection) and rinse the vulva with cool water after intercourse. (To further protect against urinary tract infection, guide your partner's penis or any sex toy into the vagina with your own hand to avoid contacting your anal area. Organisms normally harmless there may cause infection if introduced into your urethra on the way to the vagina.)

**Physical Exercise:**

- Avoid exercises that put direct pressure on the vulva such as bicycle riding and horseback riding. Look on-line for special bicycle seats that can alleviate pressure against the vulva.
- Limit intense exercises that create a lot of friction in the vulvar area; try low intensity exercises such as walking.
- Use a frozen gel pack wrapped in a towel to relieve symptoms after exercise.
- Enroll in a yoga class to learn stretching and relaxation exercises.
- Do not swim in highly chlorinated pools. Salt water pools seem to cause fewer reactions.
- Avoid the use of hot tubs.

**Every day living:**

- Use a foam rubber donut for long periods of sitting.
- If you must sit at work, try to intersperse periods of standing; put on a timer that reminds you to get up and walk around. Think about using a computer on wheels that allows you to stand.
- Learn some relaxation techniques to do during the day. (*The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* by Davis, Eshelman, and McKay, *The Chronic Pain Control Workbook* by Catalano and Hardin, and *Managing Pain Before It Manages You* by Caudill, are recommended.)
- Diet: Eating a healthy, well-rounded diet is important for good health and a sense of well-being in everyone. Other than that, diet is not thought to play a role in vulvovaginal disorders, even in the case of frequent yeast infections. Ingestion of probiotics may be helpful in cases of bacterial vaginosis (more studies are needed), but does not seem to play a role in the prevention or treatment of yeast infections. Obesity produces more skin folds that may accumulate moisture or cause increased friction, increasing discomfort.
- Urinary incontinence: many women who have leakage of urine also have vulvar skin irritation. The use of daily panty liners or urine-catching panties encourages irritation and unwanted moisture. Try to minimize the wearing of these protective pads or panties. Use petroleum jelly (Vaseline®) as a barrier after using the bathroom, to protect the skin. Seek medical help if urinary leakage is a significant problem.