

# Vulval pain/Painful Sex



## Common causes

**Hormones:** a lack of oestrogen after menopause causes the vaginal tissues to thin, become drier and more prone to splitting. This can lead to painful intercourse and irritation of the vulva. This is a very common issue after menopause, but is not often discussed.

**Skin conditions:** chronic skin conditions such as recurrent thrush, lichen sclerosis or vulval dermatitis can cause itch, irritation and/or scarring of the vulva. It is important to have an examination of your vulva to rule out these causes and sometimes a biopsy may be required.

**Nerve problems:** Vulvodynia is a chronic pain syndrome of the vulva where the nerves around the opening to the vagina become overactive and send pain messages to the brain as a way of protecting the body. This can be as a result of experiencing pain over a long period due to other conditions and also as a result of trauma. It is often felt as a burning sensation.

**Muscle problems:** increased tension in the pelvic floor muscles can result in pain due to difficulty in relaxing these muscles. This can cause both constant and intermittent pain, often described as stabbing pain. During sex, there can be a sensation of something "hitting a wall".

## Treatment options

**Good skin care:** The genital skin is very sensitive and can dry out easily. Soap should be avoided - instead using water or a non-soap based cleanser such as Cetaphil or QV Wash. Alternatively you can use a soap substitute like Sorbolene cream, which can be used to moisturise also.

Irritants of the vulval skin are found in synthetic underwear, laundry detergents, sanitary pads/liners and feminine hygiene washes. Period pants can be useful as they are cotton based with a merino gusset.

Pubic hair acts to protect the vulva - the process of removal via shaving/waxing causes skin irritation and removes the protective barrier. Emollients also act as a barrier to urine or other skin irritants ie Vaseline, Zinc/Castor oil or emulsifying ointment.

**Lubricants:** some can be irritating to the vulva due to a high osmolality and pH. NuBalm is a NZ made intimate balm with all natural ingredients. Sylk, Astroglide and Wet Stuff are good water based lubricants.

**Pelvic Physiotherapy:** pelvic floor muscle weakness and/or spasm can contribute to pain. Release of this tension and proper engagement of the muscles will help to improve blood flow to the area and increase natural vaginal lubrication. Use of dilators can also be helpful.

## **Medications:**

- Topical vaginal oestrogen cream is safe for almost everyone due to minimal absorption into the bloodstream. Vaginal moisturisers are an alternative such as Replens.
- Topical Amitriptylline cream - this is a nerve blocking medication which helps to desensitise the nerves around the vulva. It is made in tablet form but can be compounded with a water based cream for application to the vulval skin