

# Dyspareunia (Painful Intercourse)

Causes of painful intercourse vary by the location of the pain.

## Causes of Entry Pain (Superficial Dyspareunia)

Pain during penetration may be associated with a range of factors, including:

- **Insufficient lubrication.** This is often the result of not enough foreplay. Insufficient lubrication is also commonly caused by a drop in oestrogen levels after menopause, after childbirth or during breast-feeding. In addition, certain medications are known to inhibit desire or arousal, which can decrease lubrication and make sex painful. These include antidepressants, high blood pressure medications, sedatives, antihistamines and certain birth control pills.
- **Injury, trauma or irritation.** This includes injury or irritation from an accident, pelvic surgery, female circumcision, episiotomy or a congenital abnormality.
- **Inflammation, infection or skin disorder.** An infection in your genital area or urinary tract can cause painful intercourse. Eczema or other skin problems in your genital area also can be the problem.
- **Reactions to birth control products.** It's possible to have an allergic reaction to foams, jellies or latex. Pain may also be caused by an improperly fitted diaphragm or cervical cap.
- **Vaginismus.** Involuntary spasms of the muscles of the vaginal wall (vaginismus) can make attempts at penetration very painful.
- **Vestibulitis.** Painful penetration also occurs in a condition called vestibulitis, which is characterized by unexplained stinging or burning around the opening of your vagina.

## Causes of Deep Pain (Deep Dyspareunia)

Deep pain usually occurs with deep penetration and may be more pronounced with certain positions. Causes include:

- **Certain illnesses and conditions.** The list includes endometriosis, pelvic inflammatory disease, uterine prolapse, retroverted uterus, uterine fibroids, cystitis, irritable bowel syndrome, haemorrhoids and ovarian cysts.

- **Infections.** An infection of your cervix, uterus or fallopian tubes can cause deep pain.
- **Surgeries or medical treatments.** Scarring from surgeries that involve your pelvic area, including hysterectomy, can sometimes cause painful intercourse. In addition, medical treatments for cancer, such as radiation and chemotherapy, can cause changes that make sex painful.

## Emotional factors

Emotions are deeply intertwined with sexual activity and may play a role in any type of sexual pain. Emotional factors include:

- **Psychological problems.** Anxiety, depression, concerns about your physical appearance, fear of intimacy or relationship problems can contribute to a low level of arousal and a resulting discomfort or pain.
- **Stress.** Your pelvic floor muscles are very sensitive to stress. So stress can lead to painful intercourse.
- **History of sexual abuse.** Most women with dyspareunia don't have a history of sexual abuse, but if you have been abused, it may play a role.

Sometimes, it can be difficult to tell whether psychological factors are associated with dyspareunia. Initial pain can lead to fear of recurring pain, making it difficult to relax, which can lead to more pain. As with any pain in your body, you might develop a tendency to guard that area of your body and even avoid the activities that you associate with the pain.

## A Medical Evaluation for Dyspareunia:

- **A thorough medical history.** Your doctor may ask when your pain began, exactly where it hurts, how it feels, and if it happens with every sexual partner and every sexual position. Your doctor may also inquire about your sexual history, surgical history and previous childbirth experiences. Don't let embarrassment stop you from giving candid answers. These questions provide clues to the cause of your pain.
- **A pelvic examination.** During a pelvic exam, your doctor can check for signs of skin irritation, infection or anatomical problems. He or she may also try to identify the location of your pain through gentle touch of the genital area and pelvic muscles, and a speculum examination of the vagina. Some women who experience painful intercourse are also uncomfortable during a pelvic exam, no matter how gentle the

doctor is. You can ask to stop the exam at any time if it's too painful.

- **Additional tests.** If your doctor suspects certain causes of painful intercourse, he or she might also recommend a pelvic ultrasound or laparoscopy — a minor surgical procedure in which a slender viewing instrument (laparoscope) is used to view your pelvic organs.

Painful intercourse used to be viewed primarily as a psychological problem that required psychological treatment. Fortunately, that view is outdated. Researchers and doctors now understand the many causes of dyspareunia and recommend an integrated, multifaceted treatment approach. Your particular treatment depends on the underlying cause of your pain.

## Sexual Techniques and Counselling

You and your partner may be able to minimize pain with a few changes to your sexual routine:

- **Switch positions.** If you experience sharp pain during thrusting, the penis may be striking your cervix or stressing the pelvic floor muscles, causing aching or cramping pain. Changing positions may help. You can try being on top of your partner during sex. Women usually have more control in this position, so you may be able to regulate penetration to a depth that feels good to you.
- **Communicate.** Talk about what feels good and what doesn't. If you need your partner to go slow, say so.
- **Don't rush to the main event.** Longer foreplay can help stimulate your natural lubrication. And you may reduce pain by delaying penetration until you feel fully aroused.
- **Use lubricants.** A personal lubricant —either water or silicone based— can make sex more comfortable. For some women, personal lubricants that contain glycerine can promote yeast infections. Read labels carefully or ask your doctor to recommend a product to try.

## Medications and Therapies

In some cases, medications or therapy are necessary to treat painful intercourse. Once an underlying medical condition has been excluded by your doctor, then assessment and treatment from a specialist physiotherapist can be invaluable.

1. **Treating underlying conditions.** If an infection or medical condition is contributing to your pain, treating the underlying cause may resolve your problem. Changing medications known to cause lubrication problems also may eliminate your symptoms.
2. **Oestrogen therapy.** For most postmenopausal women, dyspareunia is caused by inadequate lubrication resulting from low estrogen levels. Often, this can be treated with a prescription cream, tablet or flexible vaginal ring.
3. **Desensitization therapy.** During this therapy, you learn vaginal relaxation exercises that can decrease pain. Your physiotherapist may recommend pelvic floor exercises or other techniques to decrease pain with intercourse. Specific treatment with graduated vaginal trainers can also be helpful and these can be purchased from many sites on the internet. Amielle make a popular vaginal trainer which is widely available. The aim of treatment is to start with the smallest trainer and aim to retain in the vagina. This should be done in a relaxed environment, where you will not be disturbed. Try with the smallest trainer first and aim to keep inserted without movement, for 15 minutes. If pain or cramping starts before this then stop and try again the next day. Once you can go 15 minutes without pain then move up to the next size and repeat the process. If it is uncomfortable even to start with then some local anaesthetic cream such as Vagisil, can be used at the entrance of the vagina
4. **Counselling or sex therapy.** If sex has been painful for a long time, you may experience a negative emotional response to sexual stimulation even after treatment. If you and your partner have avoided intimacy because of painful intercourse, you may also need help improving communication with your partner and restoring sexual intimacy. Talking to a counsellor or sex therapist can help resolve these issues.

Make some changes to your hygiene habits to help minimize pain or discomfort during sex. Avoid scented bath products, such as body washes and shower gels. These products can irritate your genital area and impair your natural lubrication, particularly if you overuse them. Skip douching as well.