

Vulval Pain (Vulvodynia)

What is Vulvodynia?

Some women develop pain in the vulval area at the opening of the vagina which is not linked with an ongoing infection or an actual skin disorder. The pain may spread down the inner thighs and be 'burning' or 'stabbing'. The pain may be mild or may be severe enough to keep her awake. Women of all ages may be affected.

The skin may be slightly reddened or may look completely normal. Swabs and biopsies may be normal too. This may mean it takes a long time to get a diagnosis.

It seems that the nerves to the vulval skin become hypersensitive so that light pressure feels painful. Sometimes the area is painful even without any pressure.

The vulva may be too sore to use tampons or have intercourse. Even cycling or prolonged sitting may cause pain.

This kind of pain can affect other parts of the body such as the jaw or can occur after shingles. It is called neuropathic pain. The bladder may be involved and this condition is called interstitial cystitis.

What causes vulvodynia?

Some women feel that their problem started after a severe attack of what was thought to be vaginal candida (thrush). For many women there is no obvious cause.

Vulvodynia is not related to cancer. It is not infectious and cannot be passed on to other people.

Can it be treated?

Treatment is usually successful but may take several weeks to start working. The tablet medication is generally continued for 4-6 months.

Treatment includes:

Trimovate cream applied daily for 6 weeks. Trimovate is a cream containing a mixture of steroid, anti-fungal and antibacterial drugs. It can improve symptoms from inflammation. If a pea sized amount is used every

day there should not be any of the side effects that can happen with steroid tablets.

Amitriptyline tablets

These tablets can treat depression at high doses but are used at a low dose for neuropathic vulval pain. Common side effects include drowsiness, dry mouth and constipation. It is important to check that they don't affect other medicines you are taking.

Gabapentin tablets

These tablets are used to treat epilepsy as well as neuropathic pain. They may cause diarrhoea, dry mouth or drowsiness.

What Can I Do About It?

Avoiding possible vulval irritants such as soap, biological washing powder, panty liners and even prescribed 'thrush creams' gives the best chance of improvement. You will be offered an advice sheet about this

For many women it takes a long time to get to the diagnosis of vulvodynia and they may feel awkward about discussing their symptoms even with close friends. It is an increasingly frequent problem. Although vulvodynia does not hit the headlines, many women are affected.

Women who find that sex is painful often worry that this may affect their relationship with their partner. Many couples find it helpful to agree not to attempt penetrative intercourse until the symptoms are better. This can take the pressure off both partners.

Once the vulvodynia is improved it may still take a while for a woman's sex drive to return and for her to feel confident to attempt intercourse.