

Vulvar Care



The vulva is the term for women's external genital (sexual) organs. The vulva is the whole area from the pubic mons (the pad of tissue covered by hair) to the anus. The vulva includes the labia majora (outer lips), labia minora (inner lips), the clitoris, the urethral and vaginal openings, and the area between the vagina and the anus called the perineum.

Everyday habits can make a big difference in the health and comfort of your vagina and vulvar area. The vulva and vagina can be very sensitive to many products that women commonly use. These include some soaps, shower and bath products, laundry products, panty liners and pads, and feminine hygiene washes and sprays. Over-the-counter and even prescription medications can cause vulvar itching and burning that may feel like a vaginal infection. If you already have a vulvar or vaginal problem, using these products may make the pain or itching worse.

What makes vulvar irritation worse?

Women with vaginal infections or vulvar conditions often use over-the-counter products to stop itching, burning, or pain. Although for some women these products may be helpful at times, for many women they often don't help and may worsen the pain or itching. Many over-the-counter products for vulvovaginal problems have ingredients that can cause pain or itching. The medicines women buy to treat yeast infections can cause pain or burning, especially the 1-day products. Women often scratch or rub when they feel itchy or irritated, and this makes them feel more uncomfortable. Frequent washing with soap and other cleansing products also can increase pain or itching.

What helps or prevents vulvar irritation?

Stopping the use of everything that can cause or worsen pain or itching is the first step in allowing the skin to heal. If you have a vaginal infection or vulvar skin problem, especially one that does not get better easily or keeps coming back, avoiding all things that might cause pain or itching is an important part of your care.

The recommendations that follow will be helpful to women with vaginal and vulvar discomfort. They also will improve vaginal and vulvar health for all women. Talk to your health care provider about your specific problem and recommended treatment.

Bathing and Hygiene

- Use your hands only to wash. Do not use washcloths, loofahs, puffs, and such. Pat dry after bathing.
- Use an unscented bar soap (examples: Dove, Cetaphil, Basis, Vanicream).
- Avoid bubble baths, bath salts, and scented oils.
- Use soft, white, unscented toilet paper.
- Do not use baby wipes, personal wipes, douches, sprays, perfumes, or other feminine hygiene products. These can cause pain or itching.
- Do not douche. It is not helpful or necessary and sometimes can lead to vaginal infections.
- If you have a problem cleaning after a bowel movement, do not rub! Try using mineral oil or an unscented liquid soap (examples: Dove, Cetaphil, Basis, Vanicream). A make up remover that contains mineral oil, petroleum jelly, and paraffin also can be used (example: Albolene moisturizing cleanser).
- Urine leaking can cause the vulva to have a rash or become painful. If this is a problem, try to avoid using pads when you are at home and rinse the vulva with plain water when you can.

During Your Periods

- Avoid wearing panty liners or pads every day. If that is not possible, try to wear them as little as possible and not when you are at home. Use unscented panty liners or pads. Avoid any panty liners or pads that say they retain moisture. Some women find that organic panty liners or pads are helpful.

Clothing and Laundry

- Always use the same brand of unscented laundry detergent. Do not use bleach, liquid fabric softeners, or fabric softener sheets that you put in the dryer.
- Wear all cotton underwear, not just cotton-crotch underwear. Do not wear girdles or thongs, and try to keep underwear loose. Pantyhose also can increase moisture and heat that can worsen pain, itching, or rashes. Try knee-high or thigh-high hose.
- Do not sit in a wet bathing suit or stay in sweaty exercise clothes.
- Leaving the vulva uncovered at night (not wearing underwear) to allow the vulvar area to be open to air can be helpful.

Over-the-counter Vulvar and Vaginal Products and Medicines

- Do not use any over-the-counter products for vulvar or vaginal itching. Avoid all products that include benzocaine (examples: Vagisil, Lanacane, Vagicaine). Over-the-counter medicines for yeast infections also can cause pain or itching, especially the 1-day products.

For Comfort

- Do not scratch! Scratching and rubbing will make your symptoms worse. If you cannot stop scratching, contact your health care provider to be evaluated.
- Keep a freezer gel pack in the refrigerator; wrap the pack in a washcloth and put it against your vulva. Refrigerated petroleum jelly (Vaseline) and cold plain yogurt put on a maxi-pad and placed next to the vulva can be soothing.
- Petroleum jelly is a wonderful moisturizer to use on the vulva after bathing and can be used anytime for comfort. Do not use petroleum jelly with condoms—it can break down the condom so it gets holes in it.
- A lukewarm or warm bath can be soothing. Do not put any soaps, bubble bath, or oils in the water. Check with your pharmacy for a plastic sitz bath that fits into the toilet and use that to sit in for soaking.
- For vulvar skin that is painful from scratching, try a “soak and seal.” Soak in a lukewarm tub or use a compress for 5 to 10 minutes, pat dry, and then apply a layer of petroleum jelly. The water soothes the painful skin, and the petroleum jelly keeps the area moist and soft.

For Sexual Activity

- Some birth control products you can get over-the-counter (examples: foam, film, creams, sponges) cause pain or itching for some women. If this happens to you, try a different brand or talk to your health care provider about a different type of birth control.
- A lubricant may be helpful during sex, especially for women who are postmenopausal. Use an unscented lubricant (examples: KY jelly, Astroglide, Slippery Stuff). Do not use lubricants that will heat on contact. Do not use oils or oil-based lubricants like petroleum jelly with condoms.
- Women who are postmenopausal may find that a vaginal moisturizer is helpful (example: Replens). This is not used as a lubricant when having sex but may make sex more comfortable.

For More Information

The V Book by Dr. Elizabeth Stewart (Bantam Books, 2002) is an excellent book about vulvar and vaginal health and is available at many stores where books are sold.

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