

Vulvodynia

Description:

Vulvodynia literally means pain of the vulva. Vulvodynia is a chronic vulval discomfort that is characterised by burning, stinging, rawness or irritation.

Symptoms:

The pain experienced by women with vulvodynia varies in intensity from moderate to severe and can be constant or intermittent. Often, women experience the pain for a number of years before diagnosis.

Sexual intercourse, inserting a tampon or placing pressure on the area due to tight clothing, bike riding, walking or sitting can all cause pain. Women often report a burning or stinging sensation following intercourse which can last from one to three days.

Numerous factors have been suggested as causing vulvodynia including various vulval conditions, allergies, dermatitis, candidiasis, hormonal reaction, sexually transmitted infections and sexual dysfunction. However, no single factor has been proven to be the cause. Women who suffer from fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome or interstitial cystitis appear to have a higher incidence of vulvodynia, although the reason for this is not known.

Treatment:

Treatment for vulvodynia is focused on relieving the discomfort experienced. If other conditions are thought to be the cause (ie. dermatitis, thrush), these should be identified and treated. Some women find a mild local anaesthetic ointment applied to the area provides relief.

Prevention:

There are a number of steps that women may consider that could assist in reducing the symptoms of vulvodynia.

- Switch to hypoallergenic versions of products like toilet paper and laundry detergent as these products have no or limited perfume and colourings known to cause irritation.
- Consider using no soap or a moisturising soap to wash with.
- Keep the genital area from becoming dry and irritated by using sorbolene cream for showering or apply whenever the area feels dry.
- Take showers instead of baths and do not use douches, feminine hygiene products or talc in the genital area.
- Wear cotton underwear and avoid tight-fitting trousers or pantyhose.
- Avoid constipation or a full bladder as these can place pressure on the vulva.
- When showering avoid getting shampoo or conditioner residue on the vulval area. Alternatively, wash hair in the basin.
- Gently wash the genital area following urination and also through the day with plain water. This will wash away urine and other vaginal secretions that may cause irritation.
- Consider the use of tampons rather than sanitary pads if menstrual secretions cause irritation.
- Use cotton tampons and sanitary pads which are unperfumed. Also consider using washable cloth sanitary pads (often available from health food stores).
- Try to avoid activities which place pressure on the vulva (eg. bike riding, horse riding, sitting) for long periods of time.

Help and Assistance

For more information on vulvodynia, you can talk to:

- your local doctor
- your local sexual health clinic
- your local family planning clinic
- Womens Health Queensland Wide.

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Other Resources

Women's Health Queensland Wide

Queensland Health Sexual Health website

Footnotes

Women's Health Queensland Wide website - **Vulval Conditions**

Related Content

Thrush fact sheet

Genital Herpes fact sheet