

COPING WITH VAGINAL DRYNESS

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Vaginal dryness is surprisingly common, particularly after the menopause, affecting up to 40% of women. A dry itchy vagina leads to painful lovemaking, and even everyday activities, such as walking or sitting for long periods, can be difficult. Yet there are ways to relieve vaginal dryness and improve the comfort of sex. If you experience vaginal dryness and bladder problems, don't be embarrassed to tell your partner, and seek help from your doctor or nurse.

Causes

Hormonal changes: This is the most common cause. The biggest hormonal change may be the menopause, with its associated declining levels of oestrogen. Vaginal dryness may be a problem during the peri-menopause, i.e. before periods have finally stopped, or many years later, when oestrogen levels are very low.

Like your gut, your vagina needs "healthy bacteria" to function properly. Oestrogen helps maintain this balance by keeping it acidic. This acidity helps to prevent a build-up of unhealthy bacteria and maintains the "good" bacteria. Oestrogen also maintains moistness, which is good for your vagina too. When oestrogen levels decline, the healthy bacteria may be lost, leaving your vagina less elastic and more vulnerable to infection and dryness.

Medicines: As well as hormonal changes because of the menopause, some medicines trigger vaginal dryness, e.g. tamoxifen, some antihistamines and some blood pressure medications.

Douching : Repeated douching (i.e. swishing your vagina with water or using cleansing lotions) disrupts the chemical balance in your vagina, leaving it even more dry than usual.

Infections: These include thrush, trichomonas, or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

Treatments

Oestrogen: Once an infection has been ruled out or treated, the most common treatment is to replace the lost oestrogen, through conventional HRT or with oestrogen therapy applied directly to your vagina. If you take HRT as tablets, patches, nasal spray, gel or implant, this will help the vaginal symptoms, although it may take some time to see the benefit. If you have not had a hysterectomy, you will need a form of HRT containing both oestrogen and progesterone. Not all women want HRT and a few can't use it.

For simple relief, full HRT may not be needed. Oestrogen therapy given directly to your vagina is described as a "local treatment", and when modern ones are used at the right dose, they are not thought to cause any side effects. Modern local treatments contain the hormones oestrinol and oestradiol, but at very low doses. Examples of local oestrogens are Ovestin, Vagifem, Estring and Ortho-gynest, prescribed by a doctor or nurse.

Local oestrogen treatment is usually prescribed for use every night for 2 weeks, then twice a week after that. The local vaginal ring (Estring) is inserted for 3 months at a time, and you will be reviewed every 6 months. Some women change the ring themselves, others prefer to see the nurse for this.. Local treatments can be reduced or stopped after a while, but your vagina will return to a state of dryness once the treatment is discontinued. The vaginal ring can be used for 2 years

Some gynaecologists suggest that local treatment may be used sparingly for longer than 2-3 years, providing you are monitored.

Lubricants: If hormonal creams don't appeal to you, try using lubricating gels like KY liquid, Sylk, or the new Durex "Play" range. You can buy these yourself from a pharmacy. They are generally recommended to be used at the time of intercourse and will help to make sex more comfortable.

Moisturisers: These are intended for regular use, rather than at the time of intercourse itself, maintaining the moisture for longer.. They work by replacing and maintaining moisture and helping to keep the acidic nature of your vagina. An example is Replens, which can be prescribed or bought over the counter, and is used 3 times a week.

Complementary therapies: Adding certain things to your diet may help your vaginal health but more research is needed in this area. Isoflavones have a weak oestrogen-like effect and may be bought as supplements or in foods containing soya. The herb black cohosh is sometimes suggested for menopause symptoms, including vaginal dryness. It should be used with caution by people with high blood pressure or clotting disorders.

Irritants

It is best to avoid home-made remedies and vinegar, yoghurt, hand creams, vaseline, soaps and bubble baths, as these can make vaginal dryness worse.

Bladder symptoms

If your vaginal dryness is severe, your bladder opening may be affected too, causing you to experience bladder symptoms as well as vaginal ones. Although not strictly caused by vaginal dryness, the two often go side by side, with frequency (going too often), urgency (not being able to hold on), and dysuria (pain on passing urine) being surprisingly common. Some women find that stress incontinence (leaking on coughing or laughing) and urge incontinence (not quite making it to the toilet) may be worsened by vaginal problems.

Please note this is general advice, if you are not clear about the advice, please see your doctor or nurse.