

# Vulvodynia



## Information for patients

Gynaecology



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## What is vulvodynia?

Vulvodynia is a chronic (long term) condition of vulval pain. It is the term used to describe women who experience the sensation of pain, burning and soreness of the vulva (outer folds of skin around the vagina) when no obvious cause has been found.

## Is this a common condition?

Vulval pain can affect any woman of any age and the condition can last anything from 3 months to several years. For some women, the pain may resolve by itself but others may experience the symptoms for a long time.

## What causes vulvodynia?

The exact cause of vulvodynia is unknown. There are often multiple factors that can increase the risk of developing vulvodynia. It usually starts after irritation or over response of the nerve fibres in the vulval skin. Nerve fibres are cells which carry information to and from all areas of the body. These abnormal nerve fibres send signals from the skin which you feel as the sensation of pain.

We do know that vulvodynia is **not**:

- Infectious
- Related to cancer
- Passed on to your partner during sexual intercourse

## **What are the symptoms of vulvodynia?**

You may experience the following in the affected areas:

- Burning, stinging, aching sensation
- Soreness of the vulva
- Sometimes pain on the insides of your thighs and anus; this will not spread further
- Pain when emptying your bowels
- Continuous pain (unprovoked vulvodynia)
- Pain after being lightly touched (provoked vulvodynia)
- Varying intensity of pain
- Sleep disturbance

### **The following may help with some of the symptoms:**

- Avoid scented soap, bubble baths, shower gels, shampoo, special vaginal wipes or douches that may irritate the skin around your vulva.
- Avoid all creams unless they have been prescribed by your doctor (some women use different types of creams/lotions for their soothing effects).
- Vaginal lubricants can help during sexual intercourse if this has been painful.
- Apply aqueous cream (a very bland plain emollient) for treating dry, cracked skin. Many women gain benefit from the use of this cream as it soothes and rehydrates the skin. Some women keep the cream in the fridge and this can help even further with inflamed skin. Aqueous cream can be used for applied regularly. You can buy the cream without a prescription. It can also be used as a soap substitute and as a sexual lubricant.

## How is vulvodynia diagnosed?

Women who have any of the above symptoms will be referred to a gynaecologist. Investigations may include:

**Examination:** The doctor will carefully examine you but usually there is nothing to see on examination as the problem lies with the nerve fibres which cannot be seen on your skin.

**Swabbing / Blood Tests:** These may be performed to check for infection or inflammatory conditions.

**Discussion:** If no cause is found, the doctor will discuss your symptoms with you.

## How is vulvodynia treated?

Vulvodynia can be treated in several ways. The treatment options include:

### Medication

**Local anaesthetic gel:** This can be used to relieve pain/symptoms during sexual intercourse.

**Tricyclic antidepressants (e.g. Amitriptyline, Nortriptyline and Gabapentin) :** These are most often used in the treatment of vulvodynia. They are used because they change the way the nerve fibres send the sensation of pain to the body. They are prescribed in tablet form, starting at a low dose and then increasing every few days until the pain reduces. The response to treatment is not immediate and it may take several weeks before you notice an improvement. Therefore, it is often necessary to continue with treatment for three to six months.

## **Psychological Therapies**

Cognitive behavioural therapies (CBT) have been successfully used to improve vulval pain during sexual intercourse. It assists patients in identifying false ways of thinking in order to change them. Further sexual, individual or relationship counselling may be beneficial to provide added support.

## **Physiotherapy**

Vulval pain can cause muscle spasms in the thigh and other muscles in that region and physiotherapy can help with this symptom. Biofeedback training has also been used to improve strength and relaxation of the pelvic floor muscles (these support your vulva, vagina, bladder and anus). It allows sitting more comfortable.

## **Acupuncture**

This has been shown to benefit women with vulvodynia when their pain is continuous. Acupuncture designed to specifically affect the vulval area is available.

## **Surgery**

Surgery to remove the over responsive tissue may be performed. However, it is only appropriate for localised pain and tends to be reserved for women who have had limited success with other therapies.

## **Who can I contact if I have any questions?**

If you need any further information then please do not hesitate to contact:

- Vulval Clinic Secretary: **0114 226 8300**

## **Further Information?**

### **Vulval Pain Society**

- [www.vulvalpainsociety.org/vps](http://www.vulvalpainsociety.org/vps)

### **British Association of Dermatologists**

- [www.bad.org.uk](http://www.bad.org.uk)



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