

Vaginal dryness



You may have a problem with vaginal dryness. This can cause discomfort and pain. This fact sheet tells you about the symptoms, causes, and possible treatments.

What is vaginal dryness?

Vaginal dryness occurs when the lubrication that keeps the vagina moist decreases or stops. This creates the sensation of a “dry” vagina. It’s a common problem. It can happen at any age and is more or less severe from one woman to another. Depending on the cause, symptoms can appear suddenly.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom is a vagina that is dry or insufficiently lubricated, especially during sexual intercourse.

There may also be itching (an urge to scratch), a sensation of warmth, or irritation in the vagina and external genitalia (vulva), including the clitoris and the opening of the urethra, the tube through which urine flows.

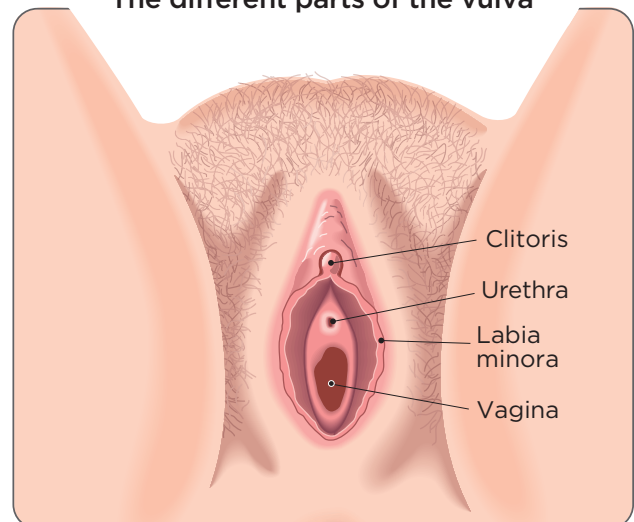
Discomfort or pain may occur when having sex, urinating, or wiping yourself. Sometimes pinkish traces of blood can be seen after sex.

What are the possible effects of this problem?

The two main ones are:

- 1** The lining of the vagina may become thinner. This can cause small cracks in the wall. These can produce a sensation of heat or burning during sex and irritation when urinating.
- 2** The tissue (mucous membrane) of the vagina becomes less elastic (vaginal atrophy). The entrance to the vagina can then become narrower and make sexual intercourse and gynecological examinations difficult.

The different parts of the vulva





How can I know if I have vaginal dryness?

You know yourself best. Watch for these signs:

- less or no vaginal lubrication
- discomfort, warmth, or pain during sexual intercourse
- itching
- irritation of the vulva
- small cracks at the entrance of the vagina that are sometimes difficult to see (but suspected because of redness or pinkish blood spotting)
- a warm or burning sensation when urinating

Your doctor can tell if you have this problem during a gynecological exam.

Why do I have this problem?

The vagina is lubricated through the action of a hormone: estrogen. Often, vaginal dryness occurs because the ovaries are producing less of this hormone or have stopped producing it.

There are several possible causes:

> Menopause

This is the main cause of vaginal dryness. It causes the ovaries to stop producing estrogen.

> After childbirth

During this period, called postpartum, estrogen production decreases significantly, especially if you are breastfeeding.

> Surgery

Having both ovaries removed causes estrogen production to stop.

> Cancer treatments

Some treatments can temporarily or permanently block hormone production by the ovaries. This can happen, for example, with:

- chemotherapy



- therapy using hormone blockers, which can cause dryness very quickly
- radiation therapy or brachytherapy near the ovaries

Some medications can cause vaginal dryness (e.g., antidepressants, or for heart rhythm disorders, or to stimulate urination).



Some scented personal care products can also cause vaginal dryness.

If you're unsure about a medication or product, talk to your pharmacist, doctor, or healthcare team

Can vaginal dryness be prevented?

Speak to a health professional as soon as possible, if you:

- have one or more of the symptoms described here
- are menopausal (either naturally or because of a treatment)
- are taking medications that make your mucous membranes dry

This will help you to take care of the vaginal dryness problem as soon as possible.

How is it treated?

There are different treatments.

VAGINAL MOISTURIZER

This is a vaginal gel or ovule (like a suppository to be put in the vagina) that can be bought in pharmacies without a prescription and that:

- keeps the vagina moist at all times
- improves vaginal and vulvar comfort
- helps to relieve burning, itching, and irritation
- helps to reduce the effects of vaginal mucosal atrophy



Gel

Ask your pharmacist for advice on which moisturizer is best for you. All moisturizers generally contain the same product, but in different concentrations. Some insurance companies will reimburse you for a portion of the cost if you have a prescription.



ATTENTION

Vaginal moisturizer **is not a substitute** for lubricant (see box below).

Vaginal lubricant

This is a gel (water or silicone based) available in pharmacies without a prescription and **used for sexual intercourse**. It reduces friction, moisturizes the vagina, and relieves discomfort. Its action is short-lived. A lubricant **doesn't treat** vaginal dryness, but it does **relieve** discomfort during sex.

TAKING HORMONES

Hormones can be taken by mouth, through the skin (transdermal patches), or through the vagina with creams, rings, or vaginal tablets. However, you must be menopausal and your health must allow it.

Hormones are not recommended if you have cancer that requires hormone blockers (see page 2).

You need a prescription from your doctor, who will tell you if this treatment is right for you.

This is a treatment that can be reimbursed by the Régie de l'assurance maladie du Québec (RAMQ) or private insurance.

LASER TREATMENT

This helps the vaginal mucosa to regenerate. The mucosa becomes more supple and moist. Ask your doctor if your health condition allows this treatment. Note, however, that this treatment is not reimbursed by the RAMQ or private insurance.

Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

Depending on the cause of your vaginal dryness, you can discuss it with your healthcare team, your sex therapist, your doctor, or your pharmacist.



USEFUL RESOURCES

Estrogen therapy:

> yourpelvicfloor.org

Click on the search icon and type in “estrogen therapy”, then “read more” under the results

Health fact sheet [*Les douleurs à la vulve, au périnée et au vagin*](#). (French only)

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our website chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante



Questions



Resource people and contacts

The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal
chumontreal.qc.ca