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VULVAR PAIN

What is vulvar pain? — Vulvar pain is pain in the area around the opening of the vagina. Vulvar pain can feel different to different women. Symptoms of vulvar pain can include:

- Burning or stabbing pain
- Irritation in the vulva – Some women also have itching.
- Feeling like something rough is rubbing the area
- Swelling – Some women feel like they are sitting on a hard ball or knot.

Vulvar pain can be in a specific area or all over. Some women have pain all the time. Others have pain only when something touches the vulva. For example, some women feel pain when they wash the area or a sex partner touches it.

What causes vulvar pain? — Vulvar pain has many different causes. Some common causes include:

- An infection of the vagina or vulva
- A reaction to a soap, lotion, or other product that was on the vulva or in the vagina
- Hormone changes after a woman has a baby
- A tear in the vulva from having a baby – A woman can have pain while the tear is healing.
- Menopause – This is the time when a woman stops getting her monthly period.

Some cases of vulvar pain do not have a cause that doctors can find.

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — Yes. If you have vulvar pain, see a doctor or nurse so that he or she can figure out the cause. Your doctor or nurse will talk with you and do an exam.

Will I need tests? — Yes. Your doctor or nurse will do tests to look for the cause of your vulvar pain.

The most common tests include:

- Tests on a sample of fluid from the vagina
- Blood and urine tests – These can look for infections.

You might also have a test called a “biopsy.” In this test, a doctor takes a small sample of skin from the vulva. Another doctor looks at the sample under a microscope. You might have this test if other tests do not show the cause of your vulvar pain, but most women with vulvar pain do not need it.

How is vulvar pain treated? — That depends on the cause. If the pain is from another medical condition such as an infection, treating the condition usually gets rid of the pain.

Other treatments include:

- Using medicines to relieve pain – These can be a cream you put on your skin or a pill you take by mouth.

- Talking to a counselor – Sex or relationship problems can cause vulvar pain. Or having vulvar pain can cause sex problems later on. Counseling can help with these problems.
- Changing your diet – Some foods and drinks irritate the bladder and cause vulvar pain. Your doctor might tell you to avoid certain foods, such as: tomatoes, alcohol, oranges, grapefruit, Chocolate, coffee, tea, or sodas with caffeine, sugar-free foods or drinks
- Putting a cold pack on the vulva – Such as a frozen gel pack or bag of frozen food wrapped in a soft cloth.
- Taking a sitz bath - Soaking for 5 to 10 minutes in 2 or 3 inches of warm water is called a “sitz bath.” Do not add soap, bubble bath, or anything else to the water.

If your vulvar pain is caused by certain types of infections, your sex partner will also need to see a doctor for treatment.

If sex hurts, stop having it until you get treatment. Having painful sex can create sex and relationship problems in the future.

Can vulvar pain be prevented? — You can prevent vulvar pain from some causes by:

- Using warm water and unscented non-soap cleanser to wash your vulva
- Taking baths in plain warm water, and not using scented bath products
- Wearing cotton underwear, and not wearing underwear or pants that are too tight
- Not using sprays or powders on your vagina
- Not douching
- Not wiping with baby wipes or scented toilet paper after you use the toilet

If you have vulvar pain, your doctor might tell you to avoid certain activities, such as bike riding or horseback riding.

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate