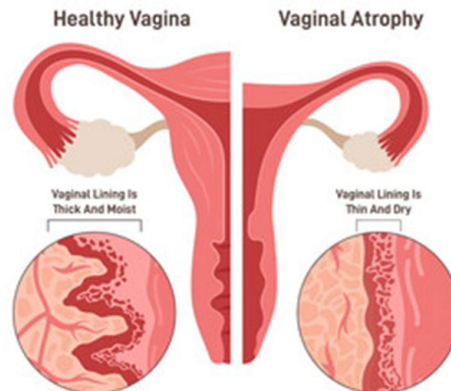


Vaginal Dryness (Atrophy)

Pelvic Health Physiotherapy

Vaginal dryness or atrophy is a medical term used to describe the vagina, vulva, and urethra (the tube that carries urine out of the body) when the area is low in oestrogen levels. This happens when the ovaries no longer produce oestrogen or produce less oestrogen, for example after menopause or during breastfeeding. These areas are very oestrogen sensitive and as levels of oestrogen lower you may notice changes such as:

- Reduced bladder control
- Urinary frequency or urgency
- Discomfort passing urine
- More prone to urinary tract infections
- Vaginal discomfort
- Vaginal dryness before / during sex
- Pain during sex
- Vaginal/vulval itching and / or burning
- Thrush like symptoms



Replacing oestrogen directly to the vagina is considered the best way of managing these symptoms. This can work alongside other treatment strategies.

What is vaginal oestrogen therapy?

This involves oestrogen being applied directly to the vagina to work locally to improve the quality of the skin. Oestrogen does this by normalising the vagina's acidity and making it thicker and better lubricated.

Vaginal oestrogen comes in several forms such as vaginal tablets/pessary, creams, gel or in a ring pessary.

Your doctor will be able to advise you on the most suitable form for you.



Is local oestrogen therapy safe for me?

Vaginal oestrogens act locally on the vaginal skin, and very little (if any) oestrogen is absorbed into the bloodstream. The advantage of using local therapy rather than systemic therapy such as hormone tablets or patches is that much lower doses of hormone can be used to relieve symptoms on the vagina, while minimising the effects on other organs such as the breast or uterus.

If you have had breast cancer and have persistent troublesome symptoms which aren't improving with vaginal moisturisers and lubricants (see below), local oestrogen treatment may be a possibility, but you should consult with your oncologist first.

If breastfeeding, vaginal oestrogen should not cause any reduction on milk production as the dose is so low and the effects are mainly local.


Non hormonal treatments

These can also be very useful for vaginal dryness:

- **Moisturisers** nourish and hydrate the vagina like a body lotion and can be used regularly with or without vaginal oestrogen products. They provide day to day relief, making walking, sitting, and exercising more comfortable. However, they are not particularly useful for improving sexual comfort. Vaginal moisturisers can be purchased over the counter or online and some are available on prescription.
- **Vaginal lubricants** are shorter acting than moisturisers and provide temporary relief. Lubricants are available as a pessary or a gel or tube of liquid. Water based lubricants have a more natural feel and oil based are more silky in texture, but if you intend to use condoms you need to avoid oil-based products as they are not compatible. It is worth trying different brands as you might prefer some to others. They are applied just before sexual intercourse and work best if used by both you and your partner. These can be purchased online.
- **Emollients** are suitable to wash with, instead of using soaps and shower gels, which can cause dryness and irritation to the genitals and vagina. Emollients can be purchased over the counter or prescribed by your GP.

Many websites send free samples so try a few and see what works for you.

Always check the ingredients in case you are allergic to them.

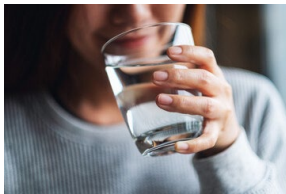


Other recommendations

- Do regular pelvic floor exercises to increase blood flow to the area and to relax the pelvic floor muscles. Being able to relax these muscles can help to ease pain during sex or intimacy and for procedures such as cervical screening.



- Stop any irritants such as using highly perfumed soaps, washing powders, fabric conditioners, toilet paper and sanitary products.
- Wear cotton underwear and avoid wearing tight clothing for long periods of time.
- Drinking plenty of water will keep your body, including your vagina hydrated.



- Stop smoking as this reduces blood flow to the genital area and vagina.
- If you are due cervical screening and are experiencing vaginal dryness, tell the health care professional beforehand so they are aware.

Vaginal dryness / irritation can be caused by infection, so please get this checked by your GP.

Further Information

We endeavour to provide an excellent service at all times, but should you have any concerns please, in the first instance, raise these with the Matron, Senior Nurse or Manager on duty. If they cannot resolve your concern, please contact our Patient Experience Team on 01932 723553 or email asp-tr.patient.advice@nhs.net. If you remain concerned, the team can also advise upon how to make a formal complaint.

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