

What is VulvoVaginal Atrophy?

VulvoVaginal Atrophy, or “VVA” for short, is also called genitourinary syndrome of menopause. VVA is a condition where the skin of the vagina and vulva becomes thin, dry and irritated. Before menopause, your ovaries produce a hormone called estrogen that keeps the skin of the genitals healthy and producing its own moisture. VVA happens when your ovaries stop releasing estrogen.

VVA symptoms include:

- Vaginal dryness
- Pain during intercourse or other penetrative sex play
- Itching or burning of the skin of the vulva or vagina
- Swelling and/or redness of the skin of the vulva or vagina
- Brown or yellow discharge from the vagina

VVA can mean that you are uncomfortable in your day-to-day life. It also can mean that sex is uncomfortable or painful, and sometimes impossible. This is especially true when sex involves putting something in the vagina.

What Causes VVA?

After menopause, your body produces less estrogen than before. Menopause can occur naturally with age or can be caused by surgery or some cancer treatments. Some cancer survivors – most notably breast cancer - may also be treated with drugs that suppress estrogen’s effect in the body. Some kinds of birth control pills can also cause VVA. Cigarette smoking may cause women to go through menopause earlier than usual, so these symptoms happen at a younger age.

Estrogen promotes healthy blood flow to the small blood vessels in your vulva and vagina. When estrogen levels go down, the lack of blood flow causes VVA symptoms.

How Do I Manage VVA?

There are a variety of ways to address VVA. Keep yourself healthy, avoid irritants to the vulva and vagina, and use moisturizers and lubricants.

1. Healthy lifestyle choices

- daily exercise of 30-60 minutes to promote healthy blood flow
- no smoking; smoking damages blood vessels and reduces blood flow to the small blood vessels in the vulva and vagina
- a diet that includes: 1) Healthy oils such as olive oil, tree nuts and seeds. 2) Lean meats, fatty fish and at least 5 servings per day of vegetables and fruits. 3) Few sweets and processed foods.

2. Vaginal moisturizers

Vaginal moisturizers can be used daily or several times a week, whether you are planning on having sex or not. They will help moisturize the lining of the vagina, make the tissues more

pliable, and may sooth itching and irritation. Moisturizers can help increase your comfort during day-to-day activities. While there are many on the market, some moisturizers have ingredients that may cause problems.

Look for these ingredients	Avoid these ingredients
Vitamin E Hyaluronic Acid Aloe Vera Carrageenan (made from sea algae)	All oils except vitamin E Glycerin Beeswax and other waxes Essential oils

Moisturizers are usually applied inside the vagina with an applicator, or to the outside tissues with your finger. Most pharmacies have syringes available for liquid medicines that can be used as an applicator.

Product	How to Use
Vitamin E capsules	Insert 1 capsule into the vagina at bedtime once weekly.
HyaloSyn and HyaloFemme	Use included applicator to apply 2-3 times weekly as directed.
Liquid Assets, Sliquid Organics Silk, Pink Indulgence, Me Again	Purchase a 3-mL or 5-mL syringe at the pharmacy and place 1 mL in the vagina at bedtime 1-3 times weekly as needed.

You should always test a lubricant on your skin before you use it in your vagina. To test a lubricant or moisturizer before you use it, dab a little bit on the inside of your wrist or elbow. The skin is thin in these places, similar to the skin in your vagina. If your skin looks OK after 24 hours, the product should be safe to use. If it itches, or looks pink or red, try a product with different ingredients.

3. Intimate lubricants

Lubricants are designed to prevent dryness during sex. You do not need a prescription from your doctor to buy lubricants. These can be applied to each partner's body as needed.

Look for these ingredients	Avoid these ingredients
Aloe Vera Carrageenan (made from sea algae) Hydroxyethylcellulose Cellulose Polymer Dimethicone Dimethiconol Vitamin E	All oils except vitamin E Glycerin Beeswax and other waxes Menthol or peppermint Cinnamon or Capsaicin Chlorhexidine gluconate Products labeled as cooling or warming Vaseline/ petroleum jelly Wild yam

Water-based lubricants will absorb into your tissues, and may need to be re-applied.

For severe dryness, be sure to use a silicone lubricant, either alone or in combination with a water-based lubricant. These lubricants have Dimethicone and Dimethiconol in them. This type of lubricant stays slippery and does not soak into the skin, so you are able to enjoy intimacy more comfortably. Some lubricants contain both water and silicone, and are a good option for many women. Here are examples of good-quality lubricants:

Water-Based Lubricants	Silicone-Based Lubricants	Combination Lubricants
Sliquid Oceanics Slippery Stuff Astroglide Natural Good Clean Love	Uberlube Femani Smooth Pjur Eros Pink	Sliquid Organics Silk Pink Indulgence Erosense Hybrid Liquid Silk

4. Routine vaginal massage or stimulation

Massaging the skin of the vulva 2-3 times per week has been shown to help women maintain the health and comfort of their vulva and vagina. This can be done 2 ways:

- Therapeutic massage using your own fingers on the vulva and a smooth vibrator used inside the vagina.
- Sexual play alone or with a partner using fingers, a vibrator, or having sexual intercourse.

If you choose to explore vaginal massage with a vibrator, choose one that:

- Is long enough to reach the whole length of the vagina.
- Has a very smooth surface
- Has variable vibration options, so you can choose what is most comfortable
- Has a width that is comfortable to use. Bigger is not better.

Are there prescription medications available?

VVA can be effectively treated with estrogen therapy, either orally or topically on the vaginal and vulvar tissues. It is thought that topical application is more effective in treating VVA than taking pills.

However, there are some types of cancers that can be encouraged to grow by the presence of estrogen, such as some breast and uterine cancers. If you have symptoms that are very bothersome to you, sometimes very low doses of topical estrogen can be used for short periods of time to help control symptoms. **If you have had an estrogen-sensitive cancer, please talk to your oncology team before starting any kind of estrogen therapy.**

1. Topical or local estrogen by prescription

You can apply some types of estrogen directly to your vulva and vagina to help restore the blood flow to those tissues. The dose is low, and very little is absorbed into the rest of your body, which leads to a low risk of side effects. You should still ask your health care provider about side effects. Local estrogen therapy comes in the following forms:

- Topical cream or ointment. Some women are sensitive to ingredients in the cream. If you have access to a compounding pharmacy, estrogen can be mixed into a neutral ointment base instead. This may help with some sensitivities.
- A “tablet” that is inserted into the vagina twice a week. The brand name for this is Vagifem.
- A ring that is placed in the vagina. Estrogen comes out of the ring into the vagina. The brand name for this is Estring.

2. Another kind of prescription pill

There is a pill approved by the FDA for VVA that you take by mouth once every day. The brand name for this is Ospemifene, or ospemifene. It can improve the symptoms of VVA. While this is a simple solution, this medicine can cause hot flashes or other side effects. **There is no safety data available for women who have had estrogen-sensitive cancers.** If you are interested in this option, please talk to your health care provider.

Painful sex that is not caused by VulvoVaginal Atrophy

Many postmenopausal women also have a gradual tightening of the muscles that are around the opening of the vagina. This tightening with vaginal dryness and fragile, irritated skin, makes penetrative sex more painful and difficult. It may still hurt even when using a lubricant, moisturizer, topical estrogen, or all three. This feels like there is a tight band about an inch inside the opening of the vagina. Some people describe it as feeling like their partner hits a wall when trying to start intercourse. It is important to stop trying to have intercourse when this happens until you get treatment. This is especially true if it hurts. Pain during sex can cause a very painful condition where the pelvic floor muscles spasm at the opening of the vagina.

If you have these symptoms, you can request a referral for pelvic floor therapy from your health care provider. A pelvic floor therapist will do an evaluation to determine the cause of your discomfort. She may give you exercises to do to learn how to relax those muscles and keep them flexible enough to enjoy penetration again.

Congratulations on talking to your health care provider about these concerns. You deserve to have pleasurable, comfortable intimacy. You can find more information at:

A Woman’s Touch Sexuality Resource Center

www.femaniwellness.com

The North American Menopause Society

<http://www.menopause.org/publications/consumer-publications/>

Safe source for lubricants and moisturizers:

www.sexualityresources.com

drugstore.com

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