

## Vulvar Health

The vulva, quite often mistakenly referred to as “vagina” or many other names, is the area of female sex organs that lies outside of the vagina. The vulva is made up of mucous membranes, several glands, sensitive skin with a lot of nerve endings, and hair follicles. This makes it one of the most anatomically and physiologically intricate body parts.

The organs of the vulva include folds of sensitive tissue called the labia (labia means “lips”). The labia has two parts. The outermost folds are called the labia majora. A second set of folds, called the labia minora, is enclosed within the labia majora. The vulva also contains the mounded area made by the pubic bone (mons pubis), a small, round organ (clitoris), and the openings of the vagina and urinary canal (urethra).

### What should you do to keep your vulva healthy?

The goal of proper vulvar care is to keep the vulva dry and free from irritants and prevent it from becoming red, swollen, and irritated.

The tips below provide a basis for good vulvar care.

#### Hygiene:

- The vagina cleanses itself naturally in the form of normal vaginal discharge. That is why women’s health experts at Viva Eve recommend that you avoid using douches, scented sanitary pads and tampons, feminine spray, intimate deodorants, etc. If you are prone to vulvar irritation, you should also avoid using scented oils, bath oils, taking bubble baths, using talcum powder, etc.
- It is best to use hypoallergenic unscented soap or plain water to wash your vulva. Pat the skin gently

with a clean towel. During your period washing more than once a day may be helpful. If the vulva is irritated, you can try drying it with a blow dryer set on cool.

- Use soft unscented toilet tissue and pat, do not rub and always wipe from front to back.
- Urinate (to prevent infection) and rinse your vulva with lukewarm water after sexual intercourse.
- Change out of wet swimwear as soon as you can, and avoid staying in tight sweaty leggings.
- If you do develop an irritation, please do not wash more or more vigorously. This will only worsen your symptoms. Vulvar irritation is rarely a hygiene problem and will not get better by washing.
- Use unscented tampons, liners, and sanitary napkins and change them frequently.
- If you develop an irritation, take sitz baths daily, if prescribed by your healthcare provider. Aveeno oatmeal baths can be helpful.
- If your vulva becomes itchy, do your absolute best not to scratch. We understand that this is a difficult advice to follow, but it is extremely important to break the itch-scratch-more itch cycle. Oral antihistamines can be an effective temporary measure.

### **Clothing and Laundry:**

- It is best to wear only breathable 100 percent cotton underwear and not wear underwear at night. Avoid wearing tight fitting pants and clothes made of nylon, acetate, or other manmade fibers; thong underwear can also lead to irritation and is not recommended.
- Use hypoallergenic laundry detergent that is free of dyes and perfumes. Wash new underclothes before wearing them and avoid fabric softeners (including dryer sheets). Rinse underclothes carefully after washing or double-rinse.

## What Are the most Common Vulvar Disorders?

### **Vulvitis**

Vulvitis is not a disease, but the inflammation of the soft folds of skin on the outside of the female genitalia, the vulva. The irritation can be caused by infection, allergic reaction, or injury. The skin of the vulva is especially susceptible to irritation due to its moistness and warmth.

### **Vulvitis can be caused by many factors or irritants, including:**

- An allergic reaction to bubble bath, soap used to clean the genital area, sprays, douches, or laundry detergent
- Irritation caused by a chlorinated swimming pool or hot tub water
- Allergic reaction to spermicide or to sanitary napkins
- Reaction to wearing synthetic underwear, nylon pantyhose or a wet bathing suit for extended periods of time
- Bike or horseback riding
- Skin conditions such as eczema or dermatitis.

Vulvar Irritation could also be a result of fungal or bacterial infections of the vagina.

Research shows that approximately 5% of women will suffer from recurrent infections. The most common recurrent infections are:

**Yeast infections:** Approximately 20% of all women will experience one in their lifetime. Diabetes, pregnancy, or taking certain antibiotics may predispose women to yeast infections. Yeast infections are not sexually transmitted. Diagnosis is made from medical history and physical exam. Usually, a special fungal culture is obtained to identify the specific yeast organism. Treatment is administered either orally or vaginally.

**Bacterial Vaginosis:** Bacterial vaginosis (BV) represents a change in the ecosystem of the vagina. It is not a true infection, but it represents an imbalance in the bacterial environment. BV is not a sexually transmitted infection, but has been associated with chronic douching, sexual activity, spermicides, young age, and IUD use. African American women seem to be more susceptible to it. Some women experience vaginal irritation accompanied by a thin, watery, yellow-green discharge, some patients report having discharge with characteristically fishy odor. Although there is a tie to sexual activity, treating the sexual partner has not been shown to reduce the risk of re-infection. BV is often treated with an oral or vaginal antibiotic called Flagyl (metronidazole) for 5-7days.

**Trichomoniasis:** A sexually transmitted infection caused by a single-celled organism. Patients often experience a copious, yellow discharge that can lead to irritation and painful intercourse. Treatment of both the patient and her partner is important to avoid re-infection. Typical treatment involves oral Flagyl (metronidazole). If infection reoccurs, your Viva Eve provider may recommend extending the treatment or order additional testing of the vaginal culture to determine the best course of treatment.

Vulvar and vaginal health is an important part of every woman's overall health. Viva Eve's women's health experts encourage all women to speak up when they have a health issue with their vulva or vagina so that they can provide a correct diagnosis, treatment, and advice on how to keep all these very important organs healthy.