



Information on How to Improve your Vulvovaginal Health

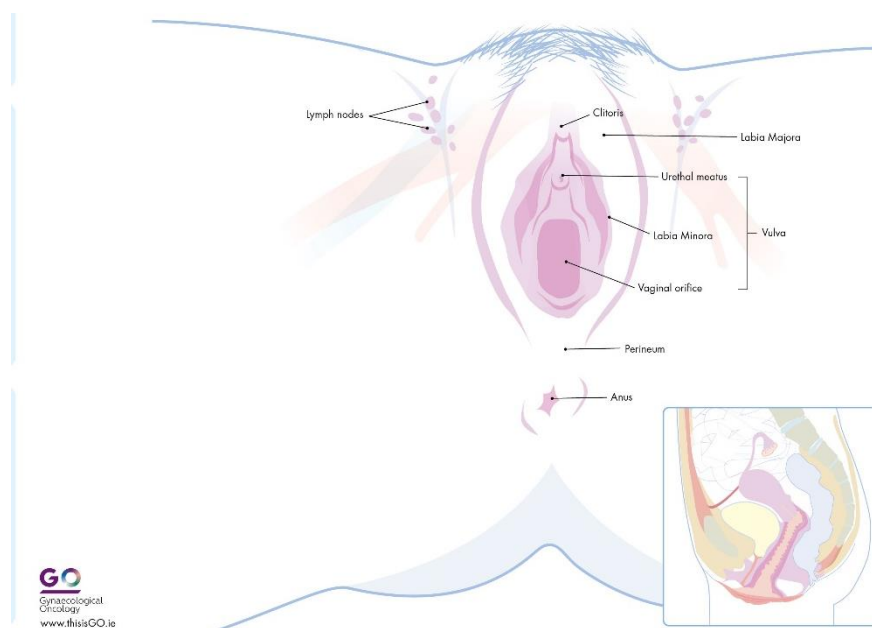
What is Vulvovaginal Health?

A cancer diagnosis and its treatment can bring about changes to your body. Vulvovaginal health is concerned with the health of your vulva (the skin on the outside of your vagina) and your vagina. As we get older, irrespective of a cancer diagnosis, our skin gets dryer and less elastic (stretchy). The skin on your vagina and your vulva is no different. This happens sooner if you have had surgery for a cancer, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, or have had risk reducing surgery because of a genetic mutation. Some cancer treatment can result in premature **menopause**. Some can cause vaginal atrophy, which is a thinning, drying, and inflammation of the vaginal walls when your body has less oestrogen. This can cause pain with sexual closeness (sexual caressing of the vulva and vaginal intercourse for example) or with a gynaecological examination. You may experience itching or burning, and be more prone to urinary tract and vaginal infections. To help reduce the risk of these side effects restoring lubrication and a natural pH to the vagina and vulva is key.

Some people may be offered the hormone oestrogen to slow down this process; however this may not be a safe option for everyone. This information leaflet can assist you in looking after this area of your body and managing vaginal and vulval dryness. This should be done in consultation with your doctors and nurse specialists who are involved in your care.

Where are your Vulval and Vagina?

The vulva is the outer surface area of the female genitalia. It is the area of skin that surrounds the opening of the vagina (sometimes called the vestibule), the labia majora (outer lips), the labia minora (inner lips), and the clitoris. The vagina is between your bladder (which holds your urine, or pee) and your rectum (which holds your poop).





Vaginal and Vulval Moisturisers

Vaginal and vulval moisturisers help to increase moisture in your vagina and vulva, and improve tissue quality. Moisturisers are different to lubricants which are used during sexual activity. Vaginal and vulval moisturisers can be used as frequently as you like, similar to how you moisturise your face and the rest of your body.

You can access over the counter vaginal and vulval moisturisers in your pharmacy which will be **non-hormonal**. You can buy them on-line also without a prescription. Some examples of vaginal and vulva moisturisers are outlined below:

Hydrating Types

Hyalofemme

- This moisturiser can be inserted into your vagina with a disposable applicator that comes with it, or it can be put on your vulva or both.
- It will reduce vaginal dryness and provide relief from irritation.
- It is long lasting and a natural way (hormone free) to treat vaginal dryness.
- It can be purchased on line or from your pharmacy.

Replens

- This is a long lasting vaginal moisturiser.
- It can be applied topically to your vulva or inserted into your vagina with a disposable applicator or both.
- It can be purchased on line or from your pharmacy.

Yes VM

- Yes VM vaginal moisturiser is a topical moisturiser and comes with a pre-filled applicator.
- It is natural and free from hormones.
- Yes VM is iso-osmotic to vaginal tissues – this means that it will rehydrate tissues that need it but will not pull or push water into tissue that does not.
- It is available on line.

Natural oils (Soothing effect)

Natural oils

- Such as vitamin E or coconut oil can be used inside or outside your vagina.
- They can be purchased online or in a pharmacy or health food store.



Carlson Key E Suppositories

- These are suppositories that you can insert into your vagina.
- They can be purchased on line but can be difficult to source at times.

Using vaginal and vulval moisturisers

While all products come with their own instructions, below is a useful guide on how to help you use vaginal and vulval moisturisers and get the most from them.

- The best time to use vaginal and vulval moisturisers is before you go to bed, it will optimise the absorption time.
- Depending on where you are in your cancer treatment, you may need to use these products three to five times a week if you recently finished treatment or you are going through treatment/surgical induced menopause.
- To make this process easier you can put lubricant on the top of the applicator.
- You can use vaginal moisturisers on your vulva, including your inner and outer labia (The skin around your vagina). Put a small amount of the moisturiser (the size of a small marble) on your fingertip. Then massage the moisturiser into your vaginal opening and onto your labia.

If you are currently using vaginal **oestrogen**, alternate the nights that you use vaginal moisturisers (every second night).

If you are wearing pantyliners or pads when you are using a moisturiser or for urinary incontinence (leaking urine) it is worthwhile considering using a skin protector cream. Examples of protector creams include Balmex, Bepanthen, Silcocks base or Aquaphor. Using pads can make your skin dry so by putting a skin protector cream on your vulva before using the pads it will assist in sealing in the moisture and protecting your skin.

Vaginal Lubricants

Vaginal lubricants are a short term aid to assist with lubrication during sexual activity. While most of us produce our own natural lubricant, cancer treatment, aging and the menopause can reduce our ability to produce our own lubricant. Lubricants make sexual activity (sexual intercourse, touch etc) more pleasurable. There are many types of vaginal lubricants and they normally come in a liquid form. They are used to minimise dryness and pain during sexual activity and gynaecological examinations. Water and silicone based are recommended. Some examples are:



Water Based Lubricants

- Sliquid
- Yes WB
- Astroglide
- Aquagel

Water based lubricants are safe to use with condoms, both latex and non-latex. These can be purchased on line or some pharmacies may stock them.

Silicone Based Lubricants

- Astroglide silicone
- Pjur
- Uberlube

Silicone based lubricants are best if you have sensitive skin. They are safe to use with condoms.

Oil Based Lubricants

- Yes OB

Oil based lubricants cannot be used with a latex condom. They are also associated with a high rate of infection and it will stain your sheets!

Natural Oil Based Lubricants

- Almond oil
- Coconut oil
- Sliquid Organic

Your skin may be very sensitive as a result of the surgery and treatments you have had for your cancer. It is really important to remember that semen, saliva (spit) and some other ingredients (such as chlorhexidine, glycerin and propylene glycol) can cause significant discomfort and irritation. Avoid flavoured, coloured or lubricants which heat up, they can cause further irritation and drying of the vagina and vulval area. Never use petroleum jelly (vaseline) as a lubricant, it can irritate the area and increase your risk of infection.

How to use vaginal lubricants

Place the lubricant on the opening of your vagina and on whatever is being placed in or around your vagina, such as a dilator, finger, or your partner's penis, before it enters your vagina.



Vaginal Oestrogen

Vaginal oestrogen is a hormone-based prescription only medication. The reason for this, is that it is not suitable for everyone. Depending on the type of cancer you have, it may or may not be safe to use vaginal oestrogen. It is important to discuss this with your treating doctor who may be an oncologist (doctor who specialise in cancer), gynaecologist oncologist (surgeon who specialise in women's cancers) or breast surgeon depending on what type of cancer you were diagnosed with. Topical or systemic oestrogen therapy is an excellent way of treating vaginal atrophy (thinning of the skin on the vaginal wall) for postmenopausal women in the general population.

It is most important to know that what you are experiencing is normal and that you should not suffer in silence.

Vaginal Dilators

Vaginal dilators are typically prescribed to stretch the tissue in the vagina and prevent vaginal atrophy after radiotherapy to the area. They can be highly effective in improving vaginal comfort and pelvic floor muscle control. They can also be used to inform women on how their body responds to internal examinations. They can provide feedback to a woman as they learn to control tension and relaxation in the pelvic floor muscle. It can increase confidence that an object, like a speculum, may be inserted into the vagina without distress or pain.

Regular sexual activity can also help maintain a healthy vagina. Depending on your circumstances vaginal dilators can be very helpful in treating vaginal discomfort if you do not have a partner or perhaps you are lacking desire for penetrative sex at this time. The use of a clitoral therapy device (battery operated vacuum device with a small funnel that fits over the clitoris to increase blood flow to the area) can be very effective in arousing self-stimulation and dilate the vagina through increasing blood flow.

Complementing Sexual Intimacy

Lubricants, sex toys and lingerie can all complement our intimacy world. Our sexual selves and our sex lives evolve over time; what worked for you in your 20's may not work for you in your 50's. What stimulated you then may also have changed. This is normal and expected. There are many sex shops in Ireland and online. Some Gynaecological Oncologists and Allied Health Professionals based in Ireland have collaborated with Shawna Scott, founder of the women's health website www.bodygra.ie.

There are many stores and websites available in Ireland and beyond. We do not endorse any of these companies.



Websites :

www.sexshopia.ie .

www.loveangles.ie

www.playblue.ie

www.lovematic.ie

This leaflet has been compiled by Yvonne O'Meara from The Living Well Cancer Programme based in the Mater Misericordia University Hospital and St Vincent's University Hospital Dublin Ireland. Special thanks to Jeanne Carter of Memorial Sloan Kettering for permission to adapt her Vulvovaginal Health Handout. Suggestions, please contact yvonne.omeara1@ucd.ie

Reference

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