

## **VULVODYNIA (Vulvo = vulva, dynia =burning)**

### **What is vulvodynia**

Vulvodynia is the term used to describe the sensation of vulval burning, aching, pain or soreness in the vulva in the absence of any obvious skin condition or infection. The symptoms can be constant (unprovoked vulvodynia) or only occur if the area is touched (provoked vulvodynia). It is a type of neuralgia, when nerve fibres in the vulva become irritated or hypersensitive and send abnormal nerve signals back to the spinal cord and brain. Symptoms can vary from a mild discomfort to severe constant pain that interferes with sleep and sexual activity. This can cause severe psychological stress. Sometimes the pain spreads beyond the vulva to involve the pelvis, upper thighs and anus.

### **What causes vulvodynia**

Unfortunately we do not understand what causes vulvodynia, sometimes there is something that triggers it off, for example an injury, infection or childbirth, but sometimes it develops out of the blue. It is not infectious and it is not cancerous. You can not pass it on to your partner. It does not affect fertility or the ability to carry a pregnancy and have a normal delivery.

### **How is vulvodynia treated?**

Because we do not fully understand what causes vulvodynia we do not know a cure for this condition but many treatments are used to make the symptoms more manageable. General care of the vulva is very important (see below). Different people find different forms of treatment helpful so it is worth persevering until you find one that suits you. You should be aware that this can take some time. Treatments include:

- **A bland greasy moisturiser** can be soothing to the skin of this area and can be applied as often as necessary.
- **Vaginal lubricants** can make intercourse more comfortable
- **A local anaesthetic** such as 5% lignocaine ointment, this can be applied as often as is necessary, it temporarily numbs the nerve endings in this area. Occasionally allergic reactions can develop so discontinue if your symptoms get worse.
- **A topical steroid cream:** These can work by reducing the amount of inflammation in the painful area. Do not apply more than twice daily.
- **Antihistamines** may work by reducing the irritating chemicals that are released into the tissues in this area.
- **Amitriptyline tablets:** Amitriptyline is usually prescribed as an antidepressant but it also has an effect on neuropathic pain (neuralgia) by its effect on nerve endings. We therefore use this treatment for vulvodynia (in much lower doses than the doses required for depression). The dose needs to be increased slowly and it can take some time to reach an effective dose. Each person responds differently and the effective dose can vary between 30 and 150mg at night
- **Gabapentin:** This tablet was originally developed as treatment for epilepsy but it has also been found to be beneficial in the treatment of neuropathic pain. Again the dose is gradually increased until an effective level is reached.

## General care of the vulva

Vulval skin is thinner than skin elsewhere and can be more susceptible to irritation. Many products even the so-called 'hypoallergenic' products can irritate the skin. If you have vulval symptoms it is sensible to try and stick to the following general advice:

- Avoid all soap, bubble-baths, deodorants, wipes from coming into contact with the vulval area (avoid washing hair in the bath)
- Use a greasy moisturiser (eg Epaderm or Hydromol ointment) instead of soap and if it helps apply it regularly for pain, irritation or itching
- Clean the vulval area only once a day, excessive washing can cause further irritation.
- Wear loose fitting cotton underwear
- Add an extra rinse cycle when washing underwear, fabric conditioners and washing powders can irritate the vulval skin
- If passing water makes your symptoms worse, try washing the urine away from the vulval area using a jug of warm water whilst on the toilet
- Make sure you only use prescribed creams or ointments
- Ensure you know where to apply the cream or ointment, if in doubt, ask your doctor
- It is helpful to use a mirror to familiarise yourself with the appearance of your vulva, that way you will be able to spot any changes

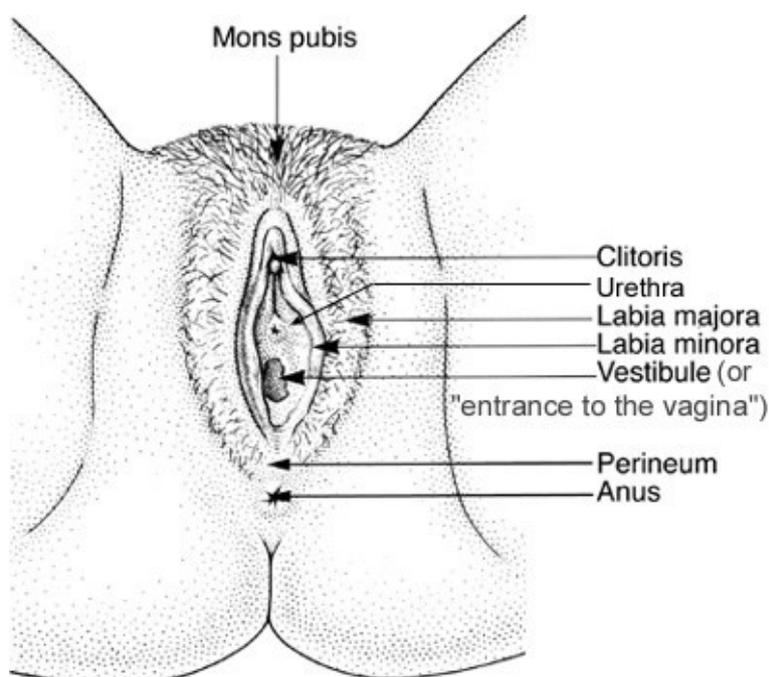


Diagram courtesy of Vulval Pain Society

### For further information and support contact:

The Vulval Pain Society (VPS), PO Box 7804, Nottingham, NG3 5ZQ

Website: [www.vulvalpainsociety.org](http://www.vulvalpainsociety.org). Email: [info@vulvalpainsociety.org](mailto:info@vulvalpainsociety.org)

Or you can search for the Vulval Pain Society on Facebook.

Alternatively/additionally you could visit the British Society for the Study of Vulval Disease at [www.bssvd.org](http://www.bssvd.org)