

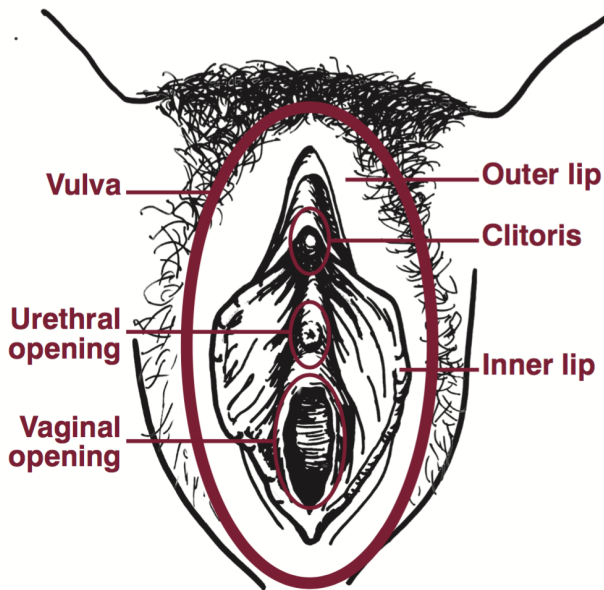
## WHAT IS VULVODYNIA?

The **vulva** is the external portion of female genitals. **Vulvodynia** is vulvar pain lasting at least 3 months without a clear identifiable cause (e.g., injury, infection, inflammation). It can be a distressing condition that interferes with activities involving physical contact to the vulvar region such as having sex, using tampons, and bike riding.

## DESCRIBING YOUR SYMPTOMS

The first step to managing vulvodynia is describing your symptoms to your healthcare provider.

Below is a labelled diagram of the vulva. It may be helpful to circle the area(s) where you experience pain and show this to your healthcare provider.



Communicate the following:

### How would you describe your pain?

- Examples of descriptive words may be sharp, burning, stabbing, stinging, etc.

### Is your pain localized, involving a specific portion of the vulva or generalized, involving the whole vulva?

- Pain at the vaginal opening is known as **vestibulodynia**
- Pain at the clitoris is known as **clitorodynia**
- Pain involving the whole vulva is known as **generalized vulvodynia**

### Is your pain triggered by contact such as penetration, tampon insertion, etc?

- Symptoms triggered by contact are known as **provoked**
- Symptoms that occur in the absence of contact are known as **spontaneous**

### When did symptoms start?

- When symptoms are present since first provoking physical contact (e.g., first tampon insertion, first intercourse), it is known as **primary onset**
- When symptom onset occurs later, it is known as **secondary onset**

### How frequently do you have symptoms?

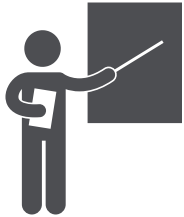
- Symptoms always present are **constant**
- Symptoms present sometimes (e.g., with contact) are **intermittent**

## COGNITIVE BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY

Pain can be stressful, frustrating, isolating, and debilitating. It can be helpful to speak with a psychologist who has expertise in pain management and sex therapy.

Goals of therapy can include:

**Learning about pain** - education on the biological, psychological, and social factors that contribute to pain will help you manage symptoms.



**Targeting coping strategies that increase the pain** - current coping strategies may be unintentionally increasing pain (e.g., hypervigilance, catastrophizing, denying pain, self-criticism). Learning to identify and replace these coping mechanisms with adaptive ones will support your wellbeing.



**Doing relaxation and other exercises to reduce the pain** - meditation, deep breathing, self-compassion, and acceptance of the present moment can help induce relaxation and decrease the intensity of pain sensations.

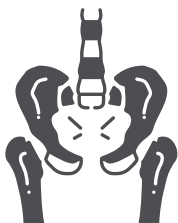


**Restoring sexuality** - vulvodynia can interfere with experiencing pleasure during sex and impact relationships. Sex therapy can help you address concerns and adapt sex so that it is pleasurable.

## PELVIC FLOOR PHYSIOTHERAPY

**Pelvic floor physiotherapists** have a Master's degree in physiotherapy and specialized training in pelvic health. They are experts in the function of the muscles that line the pelvis and can treat a wide range of conditions including vulvodynia.

At the **initial appointment**, your physiotherapist will ask you about your medical history, pelvic health concerns, and treatment goals. A physical exam of the lower back, pelvis, and abdomen and an internal exam may be performed to assess the function of the pelvic floor muscles.



After the assessment, they will work with you to develop a treatment plan adapted to your comfort. Treatment may include:



- Manual techniques to treat pelvic tissue abnormalities and normalize muscle tone
- Vaginal dilation exercises to desensitize and stretch the vaginal opening, improve muscle control, and decrease fear related to penetration
- Biofeedback to improve muscle control

## VESTIBULECTOMY

A **vestibulectomy** is a surgical intervention for women with provoked vestibulodynia. It is not an option for women with generalized vulvodynia. It involves surgically removing the surface tissue of the vestibule.



### FURTHER READING

- Book: "When Sex Hurts: A woman's guide to banishing sexual pain" by Goldstein, Pukall, and Goldstein
- Website: National Vulvodynia Association, visit [www.nva.org](http://www.nva.org)
- Website: Vulval Pain Society, visit <http://www.vulvalpainsociety.org/vps/>

### Connect With Us!

**Phone:** +1-613-533-3276

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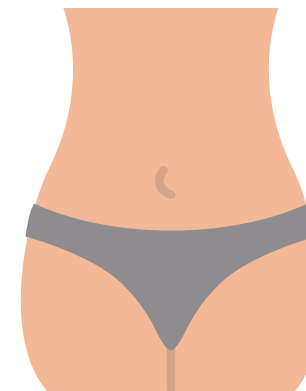
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## VULVODYNIA

### AN INTRODUCTION FOR WOMEN WITH GENITAL PAIN



**QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY  
SEXUAL HEALTH  
RESEARCH LAB**