

Introduction

This section provides information and strategies to improve the health and wellbeing of your vulval area.

Taking care of the vulva

The vulva is made up of the skin and fleshy lips outside the entrance to your vagina. Vulval skin is quite sensitive and it may react to irritants such as soaps, body wash, shampoos and deodorants. The recommendations here are applicable to all women, but especially those with vulval conditions or sensitivities (including dermatitis, vulval pain, thrush, BV, lichen or vaginal discharges). These guidelines can be used with other vulval treatments.

Clothing

It can help to wear comfortable 100% cotton underwear. Avoid G-strings or thongs as the friction and nylon material can exacerbate many vulval conditions and irritate the area. When washing your clothes use non-biological products and do not use fabric softeners or conditioners. Avoid or reduce how often you wear tight trousers or clothing (such as cycling shorts, tight jeans or leggings or tights) as these can rub and cause irritation and also limit ventilation to the vulva.

Washing and wiping

As you know, after you go to the toilet, always wipe from front to back. When washing, rinsing with warm water is all that is required to keep your genital area clean. Avoid using soap or body wash to wash your genital area (even ones that target the genital area e.g. *Femfresh*). All of these products contain soap, fragrances, preservatives and chemicals that can disrupt the delicate ecosystem of your vagina and irritate the skin.

Avoid vaginal deodorant sprays, douches and disinfectant (e.g. *Detto*) as these also irritate vulval skin. Instead use a

soap substitute such as Epaderm or Dermol to wash and moisturise the vulva. Aveeno products or Cetrabe or Aqueous cream (without Sodium Lauryl Sulphate) are also good other alternatives to soap. If you have any skin sensitivities, you may find it helpful to avoid using soap or bubble bath all together. You could also avoid shampoo from contacting vulval skin by washing your hair over the sink or by leaning over in the shower when rinsing your hair.

Hair removal

Waxing, shaving and using depilatory creams can also worsen skin problems or increase the sensitivity of the skin. Pubic hair has several protective functions. It has a cushioning effect and reduces friction during sex and also helps to maintain the delicate ecosystem of the vulval area. It may help to leave your pubic hair as close to natural as possible (or trim with small rounded scissors) particularly if you have sensitive skin.

Lifestyle and well-being

Take care of yourself and your general health by eating a well-balanced diet, getting adequate sleep, drinking plenty of water, taking regular exercise and seeking support for any difficulties or stresses you may be experiencing. Your genitals should be a source of pleasure and taking care of this somewhat hidden but important part of your body is a way of taking care of yourself and your general wellbeing.

Please ask your clinician for further information or advice.

Helpful Resources

- *Becoming Orgasmic – A Sexual Growth Programme for Women* (Heiman & Lopicolo)
- *Sex for One* (Betty Dodson)
- *My Secret Garden—Women’s Sexual Fantasies*. (Nancy Friday)
- *Overcoming Sexual Problems* (Vicky Ford)
- *Tickle Your Fancy: A Woman’s Guide to Self-Pleasure* (Sadie Allison)