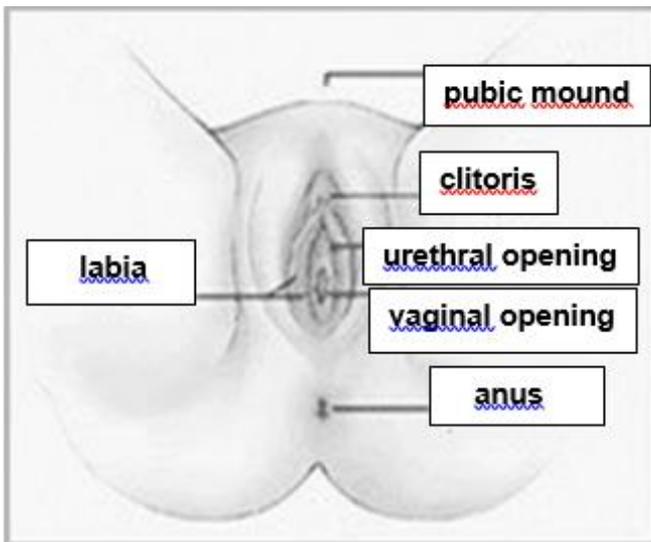


Intimate skin and mucosal care

This guide provides information and advice on self-care for women who experience problems with intimate skin or mucosal dryness. Dryness of the intimate area can be caused by many factors, most common being menopause. Decrease in the female hormone estrogen causes itching and dryness. In addition, some medications, birth control pills, medical treatments (radiotherapy, surgery), illnesses (skin conditions, cancers of the external genitalia, papillomavirus), and sexual disorders can cause mucosal dryness, itching, and pain to touch.

Female intimate area and anatomy

Female intimate area consists of the vagina, the external female genital organs, meaning the labia, and the skin around the vagina and the anus. It is good to know what your problem areas are. The doctor or nurse treating you can use a mirror to show you which areas the treatment should focus on. You can similarly use a mirror to track how the treatment is working.



It can feel difficult to speak about dryness of the mucosa and the intimate area. It can evoke feelings such as shame and confusion about how you experience your womanhood and sexuality. However, it is important to talk about because it is a common problem and help exists. Intimate skin and mucosal care requires cooperation with the doctors and nurses treating you, as well as patience and adherence to treatment on your part.

Hygiene and washing

Washing too frequently and using hot water irritates the skin. **Wash your private area once a day at most**, and use only water. **Washing with lotion is recommended**, meaning that you use emollient lotion instead of soap to wash up. Soap and scented hygiene products (bubble baths, bathing salts, oils) can irritate the skin, and should be avoided. Dry the skin using a patting motion; rubbing can cause irritation.

Change your tampon or sanitary towel frequently **when you are menstruating** and avoid using sanitary towels (and panty liners) that are marketed as very absorbent, because the chemicals in these products can irritate the skin. Shaving pubic hair is not recommended if it leads to skin irritation.

Letting the area breathe and sleeping without underwear are good ways to air out the intimate area and prevent skin irritation.

Skin and mucosa care

You can use **moisturizing emollient lotions**, which you can buy from pharmacies, to treat the skin of the outer genitalia. You can find the product that is right for you by trying out different options. There is also a long-acting moisturizing gel, which can be used as an option to or in addition with emollient lotion. **Same products can be used on the skin and the mucosa.**

If you are experiencing mucosal dryness caused by menopause, you can try **creams or suppositories that contain estrogen**. This strengthens the vaginal mucosa and retains moisture. You can buy mild estrogen containing products from pharmacies without a prescription. You can apply the lotion on the mucosa and the skin around the intimate area. **We hope that you use the product that the doctor recommended you use.** In some cases, **doctor can prohibit the use of all hormone-containing products**, and in these situations, you can use suppositories containing hyaluronic acid instead of topical estrogen products.

Topical steroid creams are used to treat some skin diseases. Only use them on your intimate area if a doctor has ordered you to do so. You must use prescribed medication carefully as ordered, because using only emollient lotion or emollient oil will not cure these diseases.

Painful intercourse

Painful intercourse can affect your intimate relationship and mood, and it is important that you discuss this with your partner. You can also talk about these issues with the medical staff. **Locating pelvic floor muscles and performing relaxation exercises** can help you take control of the situation, and you can receive advice and guidance from a sexual counselor or physiotherapist who has specialized in the topic. You can ask the doctor treating you for a referral to a counselor and/or physiotherapist.

If you experience pain during intercourse, use lubricant or liquid dermal oil that do not contain irritating ingredients. There are different types of lubricants, for example lotion, oil, silicone or cream based, as well as fragrance and preservative free versions. Some lubricants can weaken the condom. It is important to read the package information to check for possible allergens and interactions.

If pain during intercourse is intense, you can apply a small amount of gel or cream that contains a numbing agent around the outer genitalia, the opening of the vagina, and the pain-causing areas inside the vagina near the opening. If the numbing agent affects your partner's sensitivity, you can use a condom. After intercourse, taking a cold shower or applying a cold pack wrapped inside a towel on the intimate area can alleviate the burning sensation. The skin in and around the intimate area is very sensitive, so do not apply a cold pack directly onto the skin.

Clothing and laundry

Take note on the material of the clothes you wear, and that they are as loose and light as possible. When it comes to underwear, G-strings cause the most irritation to the skin of the intimate area, and so are not recommended. It is best to use white, breathing and smooth materials against the skin. Wool, synthetic fibers, dyed and color-bleeding fabrics irritate skin the most. Ironing clothes reduces the coarseness of textiles. It is best to use unscented laundry detergent and avoid fabric softeners when doing laundry. Remember to also rinse the clothes carefully.

Exercise

Intimate skin and mucosal dryness does not prevent exercising. However, the mechanical chafing caused by clothing can cause skin irritation. You can use a gel bike seat or other saddle cover when biking.

Other considerations

When the mucosa becomes thinner, the amount of lactic acid bacteria that protect the vagina decreases, and the area becomes more vulnerable to infections. Suppositories that contain lactic acid bacteria can help and you can try using them. Drinking plenty of liquids, about 1.5 liters per day, is recommended; this dilutes urine and causes less irritation to the mucosa.

Social security

You can buy emollient lotions and mild estrogen and steroid creams from pharmacies without a prescription. Some of the emollient creams are reimbursable, and in this case, the doctor can write a prescription for you. Numbing agents and stronger steroid creams require a prescription.

Intimate area problems and treatment require patience. You can always contact the hospital responsible for your care if the instructions you have received have not been sufficient or if you have other questions.