

## Vaginal dryness / soreness (Atrophic Vaginitis)

Many women notice changes in their vagina and genital area after the menopause. It can affect any woman, at any age. However after the menopause it is very common – affecting over half of post-menopausal women aged 51 and 60. Women spend a third of their lives in a postmenopausal state and they need to make sure that they maintain the quality of life that they had before the menopause. Vaginal dryness does not need to be treated as part of growing older.

### **What happens?**

Before the menopause natural lubrication is produced by glands at the neck of the womb (the cervix), which keeps the skin and tissues around your vagina supple and moist. The moisture moves slowly down the vagina. During sexual excitement, extra moisture is produced to aid sexual intercourse. However, a quarter of women aged 50-59 experience vaginal dryness problems during sex and 16% experience pain.

The female hormone oestrogen affects the tissues in and around your vagina, causing the lining of your vagina to be thinner and more elastic. Oestrogen also stimulates the vaginal cells to produce glycogen, which encourages the presence of helpful germs (bacteria) which protect your vagina from infections.

After the menopause your ovaries make less oestrogen. This leads to thinning of the tissues around your vagina and a reduction in the number of glands that make mucus. You may also lose some fat tissue from around the genital area.

The hormonal changes that occur during the menopause also make your vagina shorter, less elastic and drier. These changes usually take months or years to develop after the menopause and vary from woman to woman. Atrophic vaginitis is the medical term for the condition when these changes produce troublesome symptoms.

### **What symptoms can occur?**

The changes described above can occur without causing any symptoms or discomfort. However, some of the following symptoms may develop in some women.

- **Pain when you have sex.** This may occur because your vagina is smaller, drier and less likely to become lubricated during sex compared with how it was before the menopause. Also, the skin around your vagina is more sensitive and this can make the problem worse.
- **Vaginal discharge.** There may be a white or yellow discharge. Sometimes this is due to an infection. An infection is more likely if the discharge is smelly and unpleasant.
- **Itching.** The skin around your vagina is more sensitive and more likely to itch. This can make you prone to scratching, which then makes your skin more likely to itch, and so on. This is called an itch/scratch cycle which can become difficult to break and can be distressing.
- **Urinary problems.** Vaginal dryness may contribute to various urinary problems. This is because of thinning and weakening of the tissues around the neck of your bladder, or around the opening for urine to pass (the urethra). For example, urinary symptoms that may occur include an urgency to get to the toilet and recurring urinary infections.

Other reasons for vaginal dryness before the menopause can be linked to hygiene products such as feminine sprays and harsh soaps, swimming pools and hot tub chemicals and some washing powders.

Certain drug treatments such as allergy and cold medications and some antidepressants, can also dry mucous membranes, including the vaginal tissues.

### **What are the treatments for vaginal dryness?**

Not all women have all of the above symptoms. Treatment usually depends on which symptoms are the most troublesome.

Your symptoms should improve after about 4-6 weeks of treatment. You should see your doctor if your symptoms do not improve, as sometimes these symptoms can be due to other conditions. **It is also very important to see your doctor if you have any bleeding from your vagina if you are receiving hormone treatment.**

#### **1. Oestrogen creams and other topical preparations**

This can be in the form of a cream, vaginal tablet or ring. A vaginal tablet is a very small tablet that you insert into your vagina with a small applicator. The ring is a soft, flexible ring with a centre that contains the oestrogen hormone. This ring releases a steady, low dose of oestrogen each day and it lasts for three months.

These preparations work to restore oestrogen to your vagina and surrounding tissues without giving oestrogen to the whole body. Treatment is usually every day for about two weeks, and then twice a week for a further three months. This treatment usually works well but the symptoms may recur some time after stopping the treatment. Repeated courses of treatment are often necessary or many women simply use this treatment for a much longer period of time. These preparations should not be used as additional lubrication during sex; lubricating gels should be used instead.

**If you have had breast cancer and have persistent troublesome symptoms which aren't improving with vaginal moisturizers and lubricants, local oestrogen treatment may be a possibility. Your Gynaecologist will coordinate the use of vaginal oestrogen with your oncologist. Studies so far have not shown an increased risk cancer recurrence in women using vaginal oestrogen who are undergoing treatment for breast cancer or those with a history of breast cancer.**

#### **2. Systemic Hormone replacement therapy (HRT)**

This means taking oestrogen in the form of an oral tablet, or skin patches. This is often the best treatment for relieving your symptoms, especially if you are experiencing other general symptoms of the menopause such as hot sweats, night flushes, mood changes etc. There are advantages and disadvantages of using HRT. You can discuss this with your GP who will assess your personal risk factors for HRT.

#### **3. Lubricating gels and Vaginal Moisturisers**

If vaginal dryness is the only problem, or hormone creams are not recommended because of other current or past medical problems, lubricating gels or moisturisers may help. There are different lubricants which can work really well to improve the dryness during sexual intercourse. These include Sylk and Yes. You should use them at time of sexual intercourse if you suffer from vaginal dryness and discomfort during sex.

Vaginal moisturisers such as Replens and Hyalofemme also work really well to improve the moisture in your vagina. These need to be used regularly.

Vaginal lubricants and vaginal moisturisers are available as over the counter treatments from any chemist/pharmacy.

Within this leaflet we use the term woman/women, however we acknowledge that it is not only people who identify as women for whom it is necessary to access our services. We recognise the importance of providing inclusive and respectful care to all people and their families, including those whose gender identity does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. Please let us know if there is anything we can do to make you feel more comfortable while you are under our care