

# Vaginal Dryness and Discomfort

## *Information for Patients*

### **In this document you will learn about:**

- Changes that may occur to the vagina
- Ways to deal with vaginal dryness and discomfort, including vaginal lubricants, moisturizers, low-dose vaginal estrogen and pelvic floor exercises (Kegels)

### **Changes to the vagina**

As women age, the vagina can naturally lose moisture and elasticity. Some cancer treatments have the same effect.

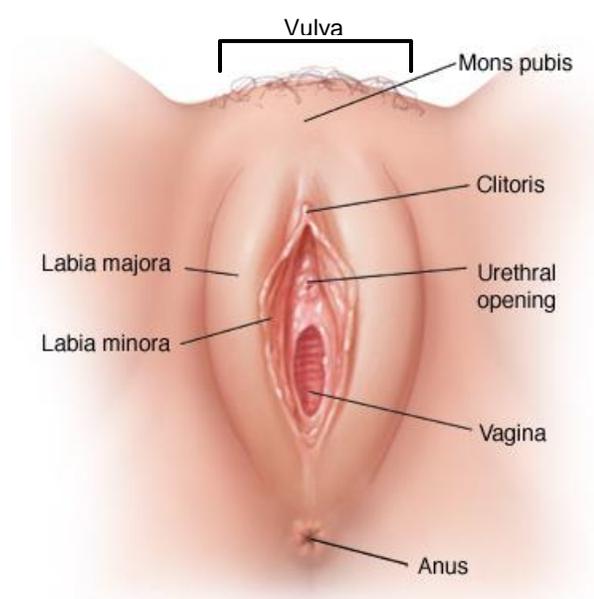
After menopause and/or certain cancer treatments, the ovaries stop producing estrogen, a female hormone. Without estrogen, the lining of the vagina gets thinner and the walls of the vagina lose some of their ability to stretch. Normally, when a woman becomes sexually excited, her vagina deepens and its lining produces drops of clear, slippery liquid. These changes make intercourse comfortable. After menopause and/or certain cancer treatments, unless a woman takes replacement estrogen, her vagina may remain somewhat dry or tight even if she feels “turned-on” (aroused).

For women with vaginal dryness or very sensitive vulvar skin, a lubricant during sexual activity, regular use of vaginal moisturizers and Kegel exercises can be helpful. This pamphlet outlines tips and products that can help women keep the vagina healthy after menopause and/or cancer treatments and to have comfortable, penetrative sex. Please use these treatments in consultation with your doctor or nurse practitioner.



## The female genital area

Here is a diagram of the names of the body parts and where they are located:



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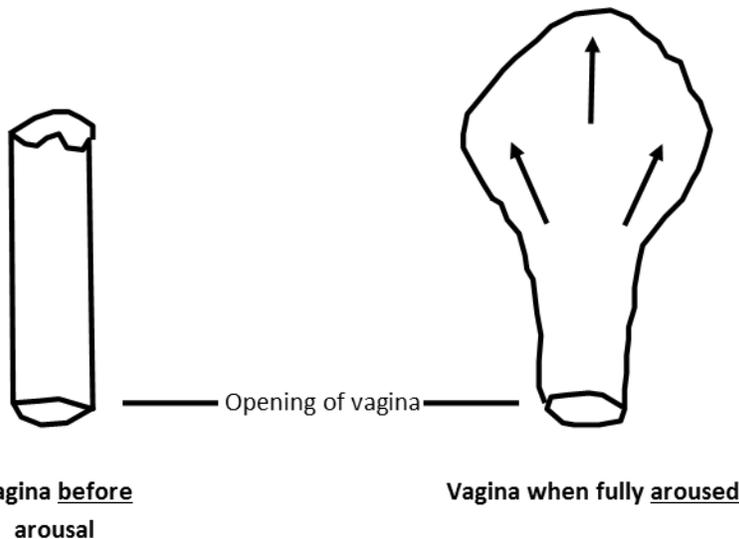
## Care of the vulva and vagina

The vulva can simply be cleaned with water and a mild soap. The vagina does not need to be cleaned or doused because the vagina cleans itself with natural secretions (discharge). Avoid personal lubricants, oils and moisturizers that are perfumed, flavoured or heating as they may irritate or weaken delicate vaginal tissues.

When you get turned on sexually (aroused), more blood flows to your vagina which keeps the tissues healthy. This can happen with or without vaginal penetration. It is a good idea to regularly pleasure yourself (masturbation) or arouse yourself with a partner. Self-pleasuring is a normal and healthy thing to do for women of all ages.

## Incomplete arousal

A very common reason for discomfort or pain with intercourse is that a woman is not completely aroused (turned on). When a woman is fully aroused, her vagina tents or balloons open, which makes intercourse more comfortable.



Therefore, it is important to make sure that you are very aroused before penetration. Some women or couples find that things like vibrators, sexy movies or stories and sharing fantasies help them to become aroused. Experiment to find what works for you.

## Vaginal lubricants

### What are they?

A lubricant is a liquid or gel you put on the skin/sex toy to reduce the friction or discomfort if you have thin, dry genital tissue.

### When would I use a lubricant?

Putting on a lubricant can become a routine part of your love making. Some women like to use lubricants during masturbation as well. Your partner can use a gel lubricant when they caress your vulva or vagina with their fingers. Ask your partner to spread it around your clitoris and vaginal entrance during foreplay and some may be spread over the

head of the penis or object for penetration. Before penetration, both the penis/object and the vaginal entrance should be lubricated to lessen friction and tightness.

### **What are lubricants made of?**

Different brands of lubricants contain different ingredients. You may wish to try a few before you settle on one you like. See page 11 for a list of vaginal lubricants to help you find the right one for you and your partner.

Paraben is found in some vaginal lubricants. Some women find they react to paraben and may find it best to choose a paraben-free lubricant.

### **Where can I buy lubricants?**

Lubricants can be purchased in person at large drug stores and sex/adult shops. It is also easy to order lubricants over the internet at sites like [well.ca](http://well.ca), [stagshop.com](http://stagshop.com), [pinkcherry.com](http://pinkcherry.com) or [comeasyouare.com](http://comeasyouare.com).

### **Types of Lubricants:** (see page 11 for a list)

**Water-based Lubricants** come in gel or liquid form. Gel lubricants tend to work best when they are thin or have low viscosity (thickness), similar to the body's natural lubrication. Water-based lubricants are excellent for penetrative intercourse, sexual touching or masturbation and are safe to use with sex toys. However, they can become a bit sticky and may require frequent application. Water-based lubricants are the best choice for people with sensitive skin. You may still want to check the ingredients for propylene glycol or chlorhexidine, which can cause irritation in some women. Water-based lubricants allow for easy clean-up with water or a warm wash cloth.

**Silicone-based lubricants** often last longer and feel more natural as they do not absorb easily into the skin. They are ideal for use in the shower or tub as they do not break down in water. Clean-up may require soap. Silicone products should not be used with sex toys (many of which are made of silicone) as they will start to break down the products. Most are approved for use with condoms. Many silicone lubricants are also hypo-allergenic.

**Oil-based lubricants** should be avoided. Although some women have found oil-based lubricants to work well for them, there is a small bit of proof that oil-based lubricants can increase the risk of vaginal infections. Some women also find oil-based lubricants to be irritating to the lining of the vagina.

## Vaginal Moisturizers

### What are they?

Like lubricants, vaginal moisturizers can reduce the painful friction that sex can cause. Unlike lubricants, moisturizers are absorbed into the skin and cling to the vaginal lining which works like your own body's natural secretions.

Vaginal moisturizers are different from lubricants as they are applied regularly, not just before sex, and their effects are more long-term, lasting up to 3-4 days.

### When would I use a vaginal moisturizer?

Vaginal moisturizers are helpful for women:

- Who find a lubricant is not enough to prevent discomfort during sex and/or
- who are looking for an alternative to using vaginal estrogen (see page 6)

Even if you use a vaginal moisturizer, you can use a lubricant before and during sex.

When starting to use a vaginal moisturizer, start by applying once every night for 2 weeks, then change to 2-3 nights per week.

### Types of Moisturizers:

**Vitamin E** gel caps can be used as a vaginal moisturizer. Use a clean needle to make a small hole in the gel cap and either put the entire capsule into your vagina or squeeze some of the gel onto your fingers and put them into your vagina. Be aware that vitamin E may stain undergarments.



**Replens®** is a gel that helps the vaginal lining retain moisture and is inserted into the vagina using a tampon-shaped applicator. Replens can improve the vagina's moisture, stretchiness and restore normal pH level. Some women dislike Replens because it increases their vaginal discharge. Replens contains glycerin and therefore can cause yeast infections in some women.



**The following examples of vaginal moisturizers do not contain glycerin:**

**Premeno®** helps to maintain vaginal moisture and normal pH, enhances sexual sensation and supports the healing process of damaged vaginal wall. Premeno is hormone-free, contains no synthetic preservatives and has no odour or taste. Premeno is a suppository – you place the pill-shaped product into your vagina.



**Mae®** is a homeopathic product containing 5 naturally occurring plant ingredients (Calendula, Hamamelis, Kokum Butter, Cocoa Butter and Sugar). This suppository moisturizer helps to maintain vaginal moisture and normal pH to provide relief from dryness and discomfort.



**Zestica®** is an all-natural, hormone-free moisturizer containing no paraffin or glycerin. It is fragrance-free and comes in the form of a clear, non-sticky gel. Zestica works to replenish the hyaluronic acid balance and moisture to provide relief and vaginal comfort.



## Low-dose Vaginal Estrogen

### What is it?

Vaginal estrogen is a form of estrogen replacement which is placed directly into the vagina. This is different from estrogen that you take as a pill, patch or an injection (e.g. birth control pill or hormone replacement therapy).

### When would I use a low-dose vaginal estrogen?

Vaginal estrogen may be suitable for women who do not want to take estrogen because of concerns about breast or uterine cancer, but have vaginal dryness and tightness even after using vaginal moisturizers and lubricants.

With low-dose vaginal estrogen, the amount of estrogen is enough to make the vagina more moist and able to stretch, but very little of the hormone escapes into the bloodstream to affect other areas of the body, such as breast tissue.

Higher doses of vaginal estrogen may be effective in dealing with other problems related to estrogen loss such as hot flashes and loss of bone density.

However, with higher doses the rest of the body would also be exposed.

You should discuss the use of vaginal estrogen with your doctor. Your doctor or nurse practitioner will need to write you a prescription for vaginal estrogen. Low-dose vaginal estrogen may be prescribed as a cream (e.g. Premarin®), tablet (e.g. Vagifem®) or vaginal ring (e.g. Estring®).



## Relaxing tight vaginal muscles

Tension in the muscles that surround the vaginal entrance is a common cause of pain during sexual activity. Sometimes the vaginal dryness of menopause makes intercourse painful. As a woman comes to expect pain during intercourse, she may develop an involuntary (uncontrollable, a reflex) habit of tightening the muscles surrounding the vaginal entrance. This condition, known as vaginismus, often develops in reaction to pain on resuming sex after some time or a medical condition that caused discomfort during intercourse (e.g. treatment for gynecological cancers). Even when the physical damage that caused the pain has healed, the muscle spasms remain.

Women can learn to control these muscles using Kegel exercises so they can relax their pelvic floor during vaginal penetration.

## Kegel exercises: a how-to guide for women

### What are Kegels?

Kegel exercises, also called pelvic floor muscle training, involve tightening and relaxing the muscles of your pelvic floor. These exercises have many benefits including reducing vaginal or pelvic pain during sex. Kegels help us to recognize when our pelvic muscles are tight and when they are relaxed. Kegels can also increase natural lubrication in the vagina.

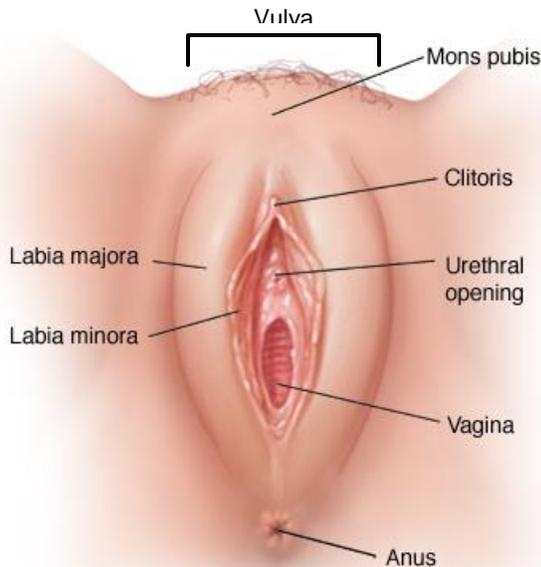
### How to do Kegel exercises:

You may have to try a few times to find your pelvic floor muscles and learn how to contract and relax them. Here are some pointers:

**Find the right muscles.** To identify your pelvic floor muscles, stop urinating midstream. If you succeed, you've got the right muscles.

To check that you are tensing the right muscle, put a water-based lubricant on the tip of your finger or on a tampon with a rounded plastic applicator. Lie on your back with your knees up and apart, or try sitting against some pillows with your knees bent and open. Hold the lubricated finger or tampon at the entrance to your vagina. If you are unsure of

the exact location of the vaginal entrance, look at yourself in a hand mirror or lighted make-up mirror. You can use the following diagram as a guide.

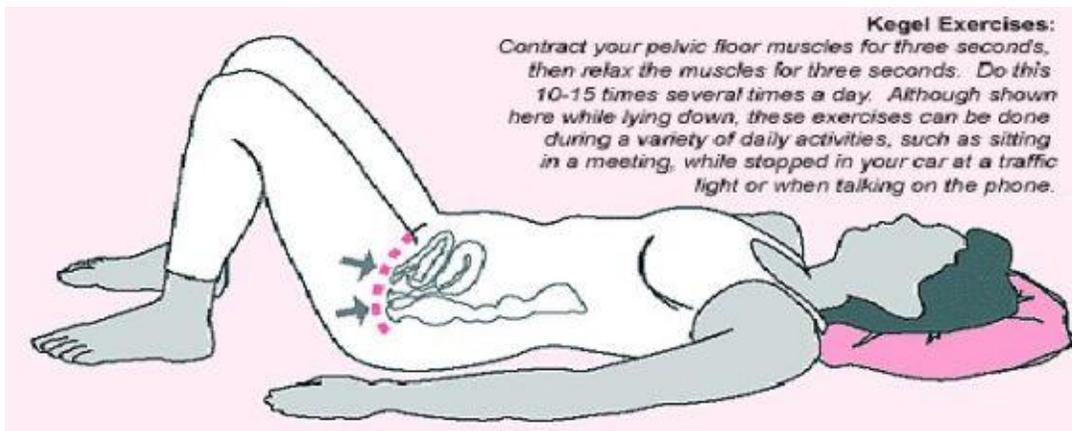


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It may be easier to see if you use your hands to gently spread the inner lips apart. Try to squeeze the pelvic floor muscle and then let it go loose. When you feel the muscle is relaxed, slip just the lubricated tip of the finger or tampon into your vagina. Hold it there and try squeezing the pelvic

floor muscles again. You should be able to feel your vagina move a little, gently squeezing on the finger or tampon. The pelvic floor muscles only surround the outer inch or two of your vagina. The deeper part of the vagina cannot squeeze voluntarily.

**Perfect your technique.** Once you've identified your pelvic floor muscles, empty your bladder and lie on your back. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles, hold the contraction for 5 seconds, and then relax for 5 seconds. Try it 4 or 5 times in a row. Work up to keeping the muscles contracted for 10 seconds at a time, relaxing for 10 seconds between contractions.



Source: Robinson, Beck, Walker & Lee Couples' Intimacy Workshop  
The Prostate Cancer Centre, Southern Alberta Institute of Urology

**Maintain your focus.** For best results, focus on tightening only your pelvic floor muscles. Be careful not to flex the muscles in your abdomen, thighs or buttocks. Avoid holding your breath. Instead, breathe freely during the exercises.

**Repeat 3 times a day.** Aim for at least 3 sets of 10 repetitions a day.

You can do Kegel exercises, just about anytime without anyone noticing!

## For more information

Websites:

American Cancer Society [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

The North American Menopause Society [www.menopause.org](http://www.menopause.org)

Book:

*Woman Cancer Sex* by Anne Katz. Published 2009. ISBN 978-1890504809.

## References

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## Disclaimer:

Product names, images and websites mentioned here are listed as examples only and are not endorsing any particular brand, product or vendor. We strive to provide the most up-to-date information but cannot guarantee that it is error-free or complete. Talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner to find out what products are best for your needs.

## Appendix - Vaginal Lubricants in Canada

<b>Water-based lubricants</b>			
Name	Manufacturer	Form	
Astroglide	Biofilm	Gel and liquid	
Astroglide Sensitive Skin Gel and Natural Liquid	Biofilm	Gel	Paraben free Glycerin free Fragrance free
Slippery Stuff	Wallace O'Farrell	Gel and liquid	Paraben free Glycerin free
K-Y Jelly	Johnson & Johnson	Gel	
K-Y Liquid	Johnson & Johnson	Liquid	
Durex Play	Durex	Gel	
Muko Lubricating Jelly	Source Medical	Gel	
O'My Natural Lubricant	O'My Products	Gel	
Taro Lubricating Gel	Taro	Gel	
The Natural Carrageenan Lubricant	Dreambrands	Gel	Paraben free Glycerin fee
<b>Silicone-based lubricants</b>			
Astroglide Diamond Silicone Gel and X Silicone Liquid	BioFilm	Gel and liquid	
Pjur	Pjur	Gel and liquid	
Wet	Trigg Laboratories	Gel and liquid	

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