

Vulvar Cancer

Understanding your Diagnosis



Simcoe Muskoka
Regional Cancer Program



Cancer Care Ontario
Action Cancer Ontario

In this booklet you will learn about:

- Definition and types of vulvar cancer
- Risk factors and symptoms
- Diagnosing, staging, and grading
- How vulvar cancer is treated
- Coping with vulvar cancer

Table of contents

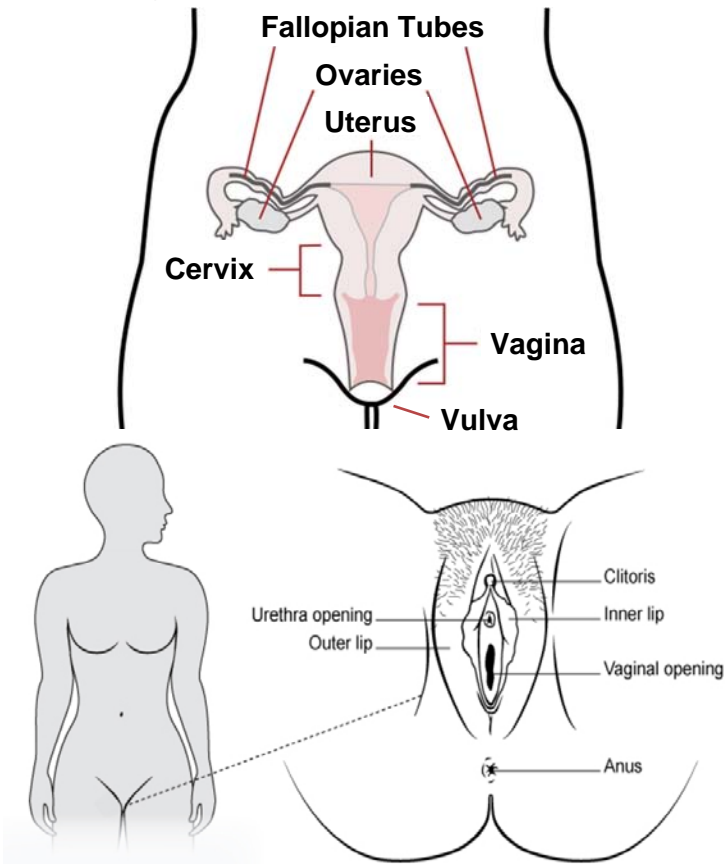
What is vulvar cancer?	3
Types of vulvar cancer	4
Symptoms of vulvar cancer	4
Risk factors of vulvar cancer	5
How is vulvar cancer diagnosed?	6
Staging and grading	7
How is vulvar cancer treated?	7
Surgery	8
Radiation	9
Chemotherapy	10
Fertility and sexual health changes	11
Follow-up care	11
Coping with vulvar cancer	11
More information	12

What is vulvar cancer?

Vulvar cancer is the uncontrolled growth of cells in the vulva, forming a mass of cells called a tumour.

The vulva is the outer surface of the female genitalia, which includes the outer and inner lips (labia majora and labia minora), clitoris, and vaginal and urethral opening. Vulvar cancer is most commonly found in the outer lip (labia majora).

Vulvar cancer is most common in older women, but can occur at any age.



Types of vulvar cancer

- **Squamous cell carcinoma** - cancer that begins in the squamous (skin) cells. Around 90% of vulvar cancers are of this type.
- **Melanoma** - cancer that begins in the skin pigment cells. Around 6% of vulvar cancers are of this type.
- Rare types of vulvar cancer include **adenocarcinoma** (cancer of gland cells), **sarcoma** (cancer in

Symptoms of vulvar cancer

Women with vulvar cancer may have some of these symptoms in the genital area:

- Itching that doesn't go away
- A lump, wart-like bump, or growth (vulva or groin area)
- Pain, tenderness, discomfort, or burning sensation
- Unusual bleeding (not from menstruation) or discharge
- Changes in the skin (colour, texture, or thickness)
- Raw patches or open sores (ulcers)
- Painful urination or sexual intercourse (dyspareunia)

However, some women with vulvar cancer do not show any of these symptoms, or the symptoms are caused by other medical conditions.

Causes and risk factors for vulvar cancer

The common causes of vulvar cancer include:

- **Human Papillomavirus (HPV)** infection, a virus passed during sexual activity
- **Chronic genital skin conditions** that cause vulvar irritation, such as lichen sclerosis

The following factors also increase your risk:

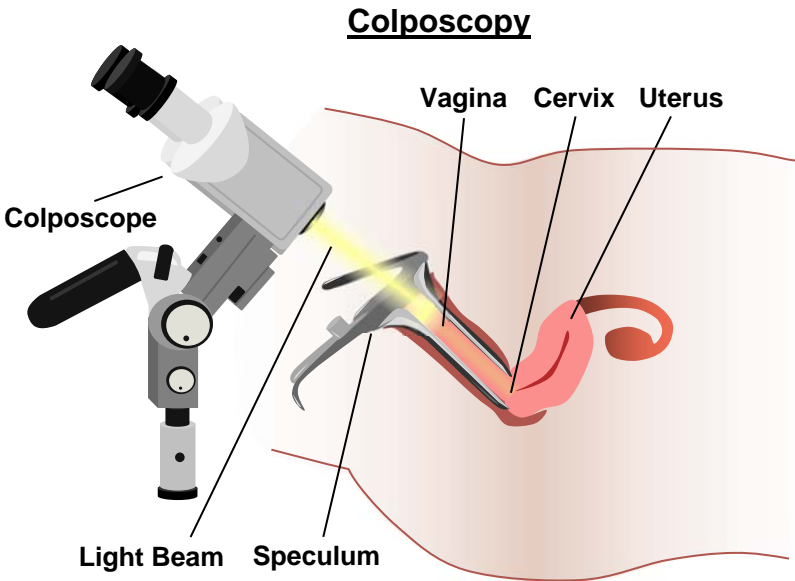
- **Smoking** (increases risk if you also have HPV)
- **Immune system deficiency** (like having HIV or taking immunosuppressive drugs because of a transplant) makes HPV infection more likely
- **History of abnormal Pap test** results
- **Past history** of vulvar, vaginal, or cervical cancer and/or conditions



How is vulvar cancer diagnosed?

Your doctor may use the following methods to confirm if you have vulvar cancer:

- **Medical history and physical examination:** the doctor will ask about your symptoms and past medical problems, and examine you for signs of vulvar cancer.
- **Colposcopy:** the doctor uses a colposcope to examine the vulva, vagina, and cervix under magnification.
- **Biopsy:** the doctor removes tissues or cells to test in a laboratory. A biopsy is the only way to prove you



Staging and grading

Once you are diagnosed with vulvar cancer, your doctor will stage and grade your cancer. This is usually based on results of your surgery.

- **Stage** (I-IV) describes where your cancer is and if it has spread (metastasized) to other parts of the body.
- **Grade** (1-4) describes how the cancer cells look and behave, and how quickly the cancer may grow or spread.

Staging and grading helps your care team decide on treatment options and your prognosis (chance of recovery).

How is vulvar cancer treated?

Your treatment plan will depend on the stage, grade, location, and type of tumour, as well as your overall health. It is important to discuss your options with your healthcare team and understand possible side effects. Your care team may include your gynaecologic oncologist, medical oncologist, radiation oncologist, radiation therapists, pathologist, and nurses.



SURGERY

Surgery is the most common treatment for vulvar cancer.

Goal is to remove as much of the tumour as possible.

Surgical options may include:

- **Laser surgery:** focused beam of light burns cancer off skin. For pre-cancerous conditions only.
- **Excision:** removal of the tumour and surrounding tissues. If the entire vulvar area is removed, this is called a **vulvectomy**.
- **Lymph node removal:** the lymph nodes in the groin may need to be removed to determine if your cancer has spread.

SIDE EFFECTS OF SURGERY

Side effects vary from person to person and depend on the type of treatment and your overall health. The side effects listed in the tables may not be experienced by everyone, or you may have other side effects that are not listed.

Possible side effects	Short-term	Long-term
Complications with wound healing or infections	X	
Nerve damage: tingling, numbness, hot/cold areas	X	X
Skin changes, changes in appearance, discomfort due to missing 'padding' in vulvar area	X	X
Scarring (may affect vaginal size, cause painful sex)	X	X
Sexual effects: less desire, painful sex, numbness, problems reaching orgasm, loss of fertility	X	X
Lymphedema (swelling of limbs or groin caused by lymph node damage/removal)	X	X

RADIATION THERAPY

Radiation therapy uses high-energy x-rays to kill cancer cells. A machine is used to give an exact dose of radiation to a specific area of your body.

Radiation therapy is often combined with surgery and/or chemotherapy.



SIDE EFFECTS OF RADIATION

Side effects will vary from person to person and depend on the type, dose, and treatment regimen.

Possible side effects	Short-term	Long-term
Bowel effects: gas, cramps, frequent bowel movements, rectal bleeding	X	
Bowel obstruction (pain, bloating, inability to pass bowel movements)	X	X
Urination: pain or burning, blood in urine, slower stream, greater frequency/urgency	X	
Sore/inflamed anus, pre-existing hemorrhoids worsen	X	
Skin changes to treatment area	X	
Loss of appetite and fatigue	X	X
Scarring (may affect vaginal size, cause painful sex)	X	X
Sexual effects: dryness or discomfort in vagina/vulva, loss of pubic hair, pain during intercourse, menopause symptoms, loss of fertility	X	X
Lymphedema (swelling of limbs or groin caused by lymph node damage)	X	X

CHEMOTHERAPY

Chemotherapy uses drugs to kill cancer cells. Chemotherapy is usually given through a vein in your arm or by mouth.

Chemotherapy may be used to treat advanced vulvar cancer, or can be combined with radiation therapy to shrink tumours before or after surgery.



SIDE EFFECTS OF CHEMOTHERAPY

Side effects will vary from person to person and depend on the type, dose, and treatment regimen of the drug(s) taken.

Possible side effects	Short-term	Long-term
Nausea and vomiting	X	
Thinning or loss of hair	X	
Mouth or vaginal sores, skin or eye changes	X	
Fluid retention causing swelling/bloating	X	
Diarrhea, constipation, or other bowel issues	X	
Sexual effects: less desire, changes in menstrual cycle, premature menopause, loss of fertility	X	X
Fatigue and/or flu-like symptoms	X	
Loss of appetite, changes in taste and smell, fatigue	X	
Low blood counts: higher risk of infections, bleeding, and bruising	X	
Organ damage, nerve damage, peripheral neuropathy, "chemo brain"	X	X

Fertility and sexual health changes

Your cancer treatments may affect:

- Your fertility (your ability to have children)
- Your ability to have sexual intercourse
- Your feelings towards sex and sexuality

These effects may vary depending on your treatment.

Please talk to your care team or a social worker (see below) if you have any questions or concerns.



Talk to your doctor about fertility preservation options **BEFORE** starting your treatment

Follow-up care

Even after treatment is completed, it is important for you to go to regular follow-up visits to check if your cancer comes back (recurrence) or to deal with any treatment side effects.

Coping with vulvar cancer

Living with cancer can be difficult, not only physically but also emotionally and mentally. There are many community organizations that can help you (ask us about RVH's Cancer Care Services Directory).

The Simcoe Muskoka Regional Cancer Program also has support services, including social workers who can help you better cope with your illness and deal with financial, legal, sexual, and family concerns.



To book a social work appointment, contact:
Patient and Family Support
(705) 728-9090 ext. 43520

More information

Looking for more information? Speak to your Care Team or try these sources:

- **RVH Health Library** - Follow the blue line to the 2nd floor for trusted, current, accurate health information. Librarians are available to help you in-person.
- **Canadian Cancer Society** - Call the free information hotline at **1 (888) 939-3333** or visit www.cancer.ca.
- www.eyesonthep prize.org - A nonprofit organization that provides information and support for women with gynaecologic cancer.
- **Foundation for Women's Cancer** - A nonprofit organization with information about gynaecologic cancer prevention, detection, and treatment. Visit www.foundationforwomenscancer.org or call **1 (800) 444-4441**.



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