

Avoiding irritation to the vaginal tissue

Dr Beth Shelly, PT, DPT, WCS, BCB-PMD

Irritation to the vulvar skin can limit your recovery or make it longer. This is especially important in patients with: vulvodynia, vulvar vestibulitis, skin disorders of the perineum (lichen sclerosus, lichen planus), and skin rash. Patients with severe pain must be very strict with these recommendations. Patients with mild pain should ask the therapist or physician which recommendations are important for them.

Washing the perineum:

The skin inside the vagina is like the inside of your mouth –“mucus membrane”. The mouth and the vagina have a normal amount of good bacteria. Scrubbing the vagina, douching, or using harsh soap will change the bacteria in the vagina and can contribute to the pain.

- There is no need to separate the labia and wash inside. Wash the outside of the labia with mild natural soap such as Neutrogena, or natural glycerin soap. Avoid all fragrance and deodorant soaps.
- Some patients find that spraying the perineum with clear lukewarm water and patting dry after each urination helps decrease pain associated with urination. A plant mister can be easily carried in an insulated sack for long trips. Some doctors recommend drying the perineum with a cool hair dryer after urination (never use warm or hot air to dry the perineum). Consult your physician before starting this treatment.
- Tipping the pelvis slightly forward while urinating usually results in less contact of the urine on the skin.
- Use white unscented toilet tissue.
- Wash your hands before urination to avoid irritants on your perineal tissue.
- Avoid shampoo or conditioners flowing over the perineum as you wash your hair.

Menstrual flow:

- Avoid tampons. If it is necessary to use tampons, limit the time you use tampons, use the smallest size that fits, avoid fragrances or scents, avoid switching brands.
- Change pads frequently to minimize moisture. Use menstrual pads without fragrance.
- Try all cotton menstrual pads. Cotton pads may be mail ordered through [Glad Rags](#) (see resource list). These pads can be washed and reused. Alternately, you can make your own pad by wrapping a wad of cotton in a soft cheesecloth or cotton flannel. The wad of cotton can be disposed and the cloth wrapping washed and reused.
- Cotton disposable pads and menstrual cups are also available
- Do not douche with anything. Always consult your physician.

Sexual contact:

- You and your partner should wash your hands before engaging in sexual interactions.
- Allergic reactions to contraceptive jellies, foams, creams and condoms may increase pain. Consider returning to the method you used before the pain began.

- Pure vegetable oil, and olive oil are generally not irritating lubrication agents. Ask your physician for recommendations.
- [Slippery Stuff](#) is a non irritating medium thickness lubricant that is often helpful.

Medications:

- You may have tried medications, creams and salves to stop the pain. It is best to stop all medications except those prescribed by your physician as any medication may result in an allergic reaction. In many cases there is no medication that will alleviate all symptoms. You and your physician may be able to identify which medication works best for you.
- Many patients find that any cream with propylene glycol is irritating to the perineum. This is commonly found in KY Gel, Astroglide and many other salves. Read the label before you purchase the product.

Clothing:

- Under pants: white 100% cotton only, wash in very hot water with mild soap (Woolite), double rinse in cold water, no bleach or fabric softener.
- Change to the detergent that you used before the vaginal pain began.
- Avoid pantyhose or tight cloths (especially jeans).

Comfort measures and other suggestions:

- Avoid bike riding. Most patients find it too irritating to the perineum.
- Eat a healthy diet to avoid possible vitamin deficiencies especially vitamin B6, Zinc, Magnesium and Iron.
- You may find ice or warmth to the perineum helps to decrease pain. In severe cases, avoid extremes of temperature in either direction.
- Daily walks and staying generally active can be very helpful. You may find that daily walk significantly reduces overall pain
- Deep breathing and relaxation may help you cope with the pain as well as decrease its occurrence.

Resources:

[National Vulvar Pain Foundation](#) – 1-941-927-8503, self help group