

# Why does intercourse hurt?

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

Painful intercourse is called dyspareunia

## Reasons why intercourse might hurt

There are several reasons why intercourse might hurt. Possible causes can be divided into two categories: entrance pain and deep pain.

Pain at the vaginal entrance

- Skin lesion – red areas or sores
- Vulvodynia – burning at the entrance to the vagina
- Adhered scar – episiotomy or surgery scar that gets stuck down
- Small vaginal opening
- Spasm of the superficial pelvic floor muscles

Pain deep in the vagina

- Spasm of the pelvic floor muscles
- Organ prolapse
- Infection or irritation in the pelvic cavity
- Abdominal adhesions, Endometriosis, Irritable bowel syndrome

It is important to tell your Doctor (and other health care providers caring for your pelvic area) if you have painful intercourse so that a cause can be identified. Tests can be done to identify a cause and form a treatment plan.

## What treatments can help decrease my pain?

There are many treatments that can help. Here are a few:

- Topical creams to treat skin lesions
- Massage and stretching for scars and small vaginal size
- Medications to relax muscle spasm and relieve pain
- Biofeedback for pelvic muscle spasm
- Surgical procedures for skin lesions, organ prolapse and adhesions
- Exercises and stretching for pelvic tension
- Vaginal dilators to stretch the tissues

What about my partner? It is important to talk openly with your partner about your pain. It may be helpful to work with a counselor during this time. Sharing your concerns with your therapist may also help facilitate your rehabilitation.

### Tips for comfortable intercourse:

- Use warm compress to the perineum prior to intercourse
- Have lots of lubrication before entering the vagina:
  - Allow time for extended foreplay: make sure YOU are ready
  - Use vaginal lubricant free of propylene glycol like [Slippery Stuff](#)
  - Vegetable oil, olive oil, water or saliva generally are not irritating
- You or your sexual partner may stroke and massage the vaginal walls gently as directed by your therapist before your partner enters into the vagina.
- Urinate before intercourse, as pressure on a full bladder may be painful.
- Urinate after intercourse to reduce the chance of bladder infection.
- You may try to have your partner insert the penis before it is fully erect.
- Try inserting your vaginal dilators before intercourse to pre stretch the tissues
- Your position may affect the location or amount of pain. Be bold and experiment.  
Woman on top, side lying, hands and knees, standing leaning forward over a table.

Remember intercourse should not hurt.

## **Painful Vaginal Scars**

Scars in the vaginal area can become “stuck” and painful (adhesions). These scars may be a result of stitches after delivery or after gynecological surgery. Painful scars may cause discomfort with sitting, standing or intercourse. Your physician or physical therapist can tell you if your scar is "stuck".

There are several physical therapy treatment options for scars. A successful result depends largely on your efforts at home in addition to the treatments you receive.

### Physical therapy treatments for painful scars

- Evaluation - to determine the source(s) of pain and to determine if your condition is suitable for physical therapy.
- Myofascial release – a special massage that softens the scar inside and outside the vagina. Some massage will be taught to you as part of your home program (you may also choose to have your therapist teach the massage to your partner). The massage may be uncomfortable but is very short and immediately followed by treatments to help ease the pain.
- Ultrasound – high frequency sound waves that go deep into the tissue and loosen the scar on the outside of the vagina. This usually helps decrease pain in the scar and softens the tissues.
- Heat – rice packs heated in the microwave may be used to increase circulation and relax muscles around the vagina. Heat helps to decrease pain after massage.
- Pelvic floor muscle exercise – gentle contraction and focused relaxing helps to increase circulation and improve healing.
- Biofeedback – this treatment helps you to “see” your muscle activity on a computer screen and helps you to learn how to contract and relax the vaginal muscles correctly.

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

[www.bethshelly.com](http://www.bethshelly.com)

563-940-2481