

The vulva

Irritation, diagnosis & treatment



Jean  Hailes
FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH

About Jean Hailes

Founded in 1992 in honour of an extraordinary medical practitioner, Dr Jean Hailes, Jean Hailes for Women's Health reflects the enduring legacy that Jean made to women's health. She had a far-sighted vision to improve the quality of women's lives and give them practical information based on the best available evidence. She is credited with being the pioneer of menopause management in Australia.

Today, Jean Hailes is Australia's leading and most trusted women's health organisation, combining clinical care, evidence-based research and practical education for women and health professionals. We aim to translate the latest scientific and medical evidence in order to inspire positive change in women by improving their physical health and wellbeing.

Jean Hailes for Women's Health takes a broad and inclusive approach to the topic of women's health. This booklet generally uses the terms 'women' and 'girls'. These terms are intended to include women with diverse sexualities, intersex women, and women with a transgender experience.

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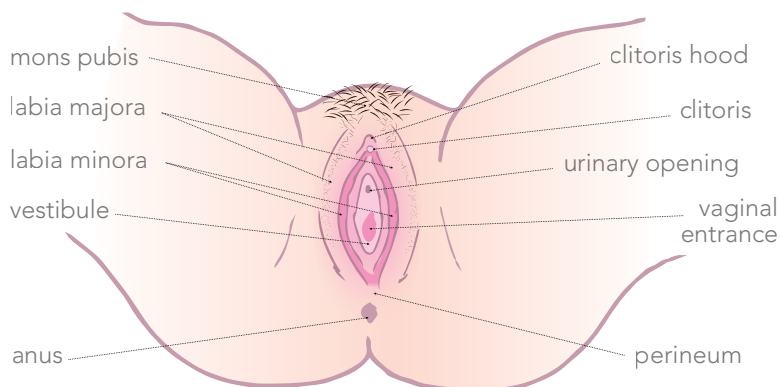
Vulval conditions are quite common and most of them can be easily managed. The aim of this booklet is to explain some causes of vulval irritation, how to care for your vulva and also to encourage you to see a doctor or nurse if you have a vulval condition. It is important the doctor or nurse looks at your vulva to make sure the condition is properly diagnosed and you get right treatment to manage it.

What is the vulva?

Vulva is the general name given to all the external, or outside, parts of the female genitals (private parts). The vulva is often mistakenly called the vagina, but the vagina is the internal, or inside, part of your genitals.

The vulva includes the following parts of the external genitalia:

- mons pubis (the pad of fatty tissue covered with pubic hair)
- labia majora (the outer lips, which are covered with pubic hair)
- labia minora (the inner lips, which are hairless)
- clitoris and its hood or covering (located at the front of the genital area)
- vestibule (immediately surrounds the vaginal opening and the urethral opening)
- urethral opening (through which urine, or wee, leaves your body)
- vaginal entrance
- perineum (the area of skin between the vagina and the anus).



What is normal?

Each woman's vulva is unique in size, colour and appearance, with no two looking the same. It is normal for there to be noticeable differences between the left and right side of the vulva, especially the labia minora. Images seen online are often heavily edited, making the vulva look symmetrical and childlike.

Some vulvas will look different due to female genital cutting (you can find information on this at netfa.com.au), cosmetic surgery, or scarring due to childbirth.

Because it is difficult for women to see their own vulva, many women do not know what it looks like. If you don't know what yours looks like, use a mirror to have a look. Once you are familiar with what your vulva looks like, it will be easier to detect any changes in the skin, such as colour or texture.



The Labia Library is a great online resource, with numerous realistic pictures of labia. labialibrary.org.au

What is vulval irritation?

Any itching, burning or discomfort of the vulva can be described as vulval irritation.

The skin of the vulva is extremely **delicate**, and there are a lot of different things that can affect the area and make it feel uncomfortable. Irritation of the vulva is relatively common in women of all ages, with skin conditions and infections often the causes.

A small part of the vulva, or sometimes the whole vulva, can be affected.

Signs and symptoms include:

- burning and/or itching
- the feeling of crawling under the skin
- redness and/or swelling
- associated vaginal discomfort and/or discharge
- skin cracking or splitting (fissuring)
- whitening of skin
- painful sex (dyspareunia).



Most cases are not serious and improve with treatment, but there are a few rare conditions that can become serious if left untreated. Finding out what is causing your vulval irritation and having it treated quickly by a doctor or nurse is important. If it is ignored, the irritation can become a source of increased discomfort and worry.

Causes of vulval irritation

Vulval irritation can be caused by any of these things:

- an imbalance in the bacteria and microorganisms that naturally live inside the vagina (known as the vaginal microbiome)
- sweating and/or discharge from the vagina
- fungal, bacterial or viral infections such as:
 - **candidiasis/thrush** – a fungal infection of the vulva and vagina. Symptoms include itching, redness, swelling and a cottage cheese-like vaginal discharge
 - **trichomoniasis/‘trich’** – a sexually transmissible infection (STI). Common symptoms are itchiness and a smelly, green frothy discharge, and sex may be painful
 - **bacterial vaginosis** – bacterial infection of the vagina that occurs when its normal balance of bacteria changes. Main symptoms are a white discharge and a strong fishy odour
 - **genital herpes** – a virus spread by skin-to-skin contact during vaginal, oral or anal sex. The first time it appears is usually the worst and symptoms may include painful ulcers, blisters, a rash, flu-like symptoms, vaginal discharge and trouble passing urine. When it reappears, it is often less severe, but usually in the same area. Affected areas may include the vulva, inner thighs, buttocks and the skin around the anus. Symptoms can be managed, but genital herpes does not always cause symptoms and therefore may go unnoticed and unknowingly spread.
- **allergies/adverse reactions to products, such as:**
 - perfumed products such as ‘feminine hygiene’ sprays
 - sanitary pads and tampons
 - tight and/or synthetic clothing, tights or stockings, G-strings
 - chlorine or sand on swimwear that is left on wet
 - perspiration and other bodily fluids

- soaps, bath and hair products
 - laundry detergent
 - hair removal and bleaching products
 - condoms, spermicides and lubricants (you can buy non-latex condoms and lubricants made from other ingredients to avoid allergies)
 - nail polish and/or fake nails, hand creams
 - scented or coloured toilet paper or wipes
 - douches (using a vaginal wash or douche is never advised as it disrupts the normal vaginal microbiome)
- **some medications and local anaesthetic**
 - **piercings** – these may cause infections or localised reactions
 - **ingrown hairs** – common after hair removal. If you are prone to ingrown hairs, a gentle loofah to the area may help
 - **bartholin glands cyst** – these glands are located on either side of the lower part of the vaginal opening, towards the perineum, and produce lubricating fluid during sex. A gland may become blocked, causing a cyst or abscess to develop, with discomfort or pain
 - **varicose veins** – can develop in the vulva, particularly during pregnancy. They usually improve after childbirth, otherwise they can be treated if they persist
 - **hormonal changes** – like the vagina, the vulva can become thinner, drier or more uncomfortable due to hormonal changes in a woman's body, such as after having a baby, while breastfeeding or after menopause
 - **skin conditions such as:**
 - **dermatitis/eczema** – common skin conditions that can occur anywhere on the body, including the vulva. Scratching to relieve itching may cause further skin damage. These may be a response to the products listed above
 - **lichen sclerosus** – an autoimmune skin condition that can cause itching. Skin may become thin, white, wrinkled and cracked. It is often misdiagnosed as thrush. If untreated, lichen sclerosus can lead to scarring with changes to both the vulva and the vaginal entrance and, in a small number of cases, cancer of the vulva



- **psoriasis** – an inflammatory autoimmune skin condition that can affect vulval skin, causing reddened patches. Scratching may lead to further damage
- **lichen planus** – an autoimmune skin condition that can affect the vulva, vagina and other body parts. Symptoms include pain, burning, itching, rawness, redness and changes to vaginal discharge. White, lacy or fern-like streaks can be seen on the vulva and there may be areas where the skin wears away leaving holes (erosions) and blisters (ulcerations). If untreated, the skin can scar and change the shape or appearance of the vagina and vulva. In rare cases, cancer can occur.

Vulval cancer

Vulval cancer is uncommon. Squamous cell carcinoma is the most common of several different cancers that can occur on the vulval and anal area. Squamous cell carcinoma can occur as a long-term consequence of infection with certain types of cancer-causing human papillomavirus (HPV), and/or lichen sclerosus that is not adequately managed and controlled.

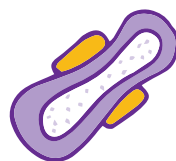
Sometimes vulval cancer may be linked to the presence of a persistent itch, roughened skin, a non-healing sore, or a lump. It is important to be aware of your vulva and **what is normal for you** and to see your medical practitioner if you feel something has changed.



Looking after your vulva

The following may help or prevent vulval irritation:

- Don't use any soap or perfumed bath products to wash your vulva – only use water or soap-free washes
- Don't use douches – using a vaginal wash or douche is never advised because it disrupts the normal vaginal microbiome
- Never use talcum powder on your vulva
- If swimming irritates your vulva, use a barrier ointment (you can buy this at the chemist or supermarket)
- After swimming, change out of swimwear immediately, shower to remove chlorine or salt. Don't wear wet clothing
- After gym, change out of lycra clothes immediately
- Wear natural fibre underpants (eg cotton) rather than synthetic (eg polyester or nylon)
- Wash underwear using unscented or hypoallergenic products, and rinse well
- Wear comfortable clothing. Avoid G-strings, pantyhose and tight jeans
- When urinating, lean forward to avoid a burning sensation
- After urination and/or bowel movements, always wipe or pat from front to back, using unscented toilet paper
- Bathe with a salt or bicarbonate of soda wash (see page 9)
- Use 100% cotton sanitary pads and tampons. Menstrual blood may irritate your vulva, so consider using tampons or a menstrual cup instead of pads
- Use silicone or water-based lubricants with intercourse. Good quality, natural oils such as olive or almond oil may be suitable too, but don't use oils with condoms as they will make them break down.



The following may soothe vulval irritation:

- Using a cold compress on your vulva may ease itching and pain
- Don't apply ice or anything frozen directly to your skin; cover ice with material such as a hand towel
- Bathe the vulva in a bicarbonate of soda or salt bath to soothe irritation and reduce itching
 - **To a tub or basin of water, add:**
 - two tablespoons of bicarbonate of soda or
 - a ¼ teaspoon of salt per litre
 - **For a bath, add to the water:**
 - one cup of bicarbonate of soda or
 - a handful of salt
 - sit with the water covering your vulva for 5-10 minutes
 - pat dry, then apply ointment if prescribed
 - repeat once or twice a day.
- As another option, you can put a teaspoon of salt into a spray bottle of water (600ml). Spray this mix on your vulva while sitting on the toilet. You can do this while urinating (peeing) to reduce stinging.



Diagnosis and treatment

If your vulva is irritated and these suggestions have not helped, don't attempt to diagnose or treat the problem yourself. It's important to see your doctor to determine the cause.

During your appointment, your doctor will take your medical history and should check your vulva. If the doctor does not check your vulva, ask for an examination. You might need a, urine test, vulval or vaginal swab, blood test or a vulval biopsy.

Treatment options

There are many treatment options, depending on the cause of the vulval irritation. These include:

- **local treatments (external/outside):**
medicated creams (corticosteroid, antibiotic, antifungal, antiseptic, anaesthetic), barrier creams, gels
- **local treatment (internal/inside):**
vaginal cream, gels, tablets and pessaries (antibiotic, antifungal, acidic, hormonal)
- **oral treatments**
- **combination of both (local & oral).**

If you follow your doctor's recommended treatments and your symptoms do not improve, see your doctor again. They may refer you to a gynaecologist, a dermatologist or a women's health specialist. Some larger hospitals have specialist vulval clinics.

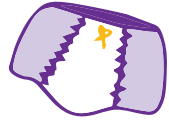


Things to consider

There are many unproven 'home remedies' for treating vaginal infections. Not all vulval irritation is due to infection, so don't try and treat it yourself. Always see your doctor for advice.

Facts versus fiction

- **Do yoghurt and cultured milk products contain good bacteria for your vaginal microbiome?** It may improve the numbers of good bacteria in the gut, but there is no evidence that eating or applying yoghurt will treat a vulval or vaginal infection.
- **Is tea-tree oil suitable to use for vulval conditions?** There are no clinical trials that show it is effective in treating vulval or vaginal infections. Very importantly, tea tree oil can be very irritating and can cause contact dermatitis and allergy, so don't use it on your vulva.
- **Is garlic anti-fungal?** Yes, but the only research on garlic and vaginal infections has shown that it is not effective. Do not insert raw garlic in your vagina – it may cause more pain and irritation.
- **Should I use special vaginal washes?** No, you should not use any over-the-counter herbal vaginal washes for vulval irritation, especially without a diagnosis of what is causing the irritation. Vaginal washes or douches should not be used.
- **Are probiotics useful for treating vulval and vaginal irritation and/or infections?** There is some research into the use of probiotics for vulval and vaginal conditions, but at the moment the evidence is not high quality, so probiotics are not recommended for treating vulval and vaginal conditions.



Remember, if your symptoms don't go away, get help from a doctor or practice nurse.

Vulval pain

Vulvodynia is the word used to describe the feeling of vulval burning, soreness or pain when there is no obvious cause found.

You might have symptoms all the time, or when your vulva is touched – eg, when you put a tampon in, have sex, or even from your clothes pressing against your vulva.

The vulva is usually normal to look at and in order to treat the problem properly, the cause of the pain needs to be determined.

Vulvodynia does not cause all vulval pain. There are other things that can cause pain, like acute infections or inflammation.

If you have vulval pain, it is important to see a doctor or nurse quickly and find out why it's happening. Sometimes if you ignore it for too long, the pain can get harder to treat.

[Read more on vulval pain and vulval pain conditions here:](#)

Vulval Pain Society website

vulvalpainsociety.org

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

mshc.org.au



Jean Hailes for Women's Health

Jean Hailes for Women's Health provides high-quality, trusted information, to assist you to make decisions about your health. We use the latest research to develop our website and resources on a range of topics, including:

- bladder and bowel
- bone health
- breast health
- cardiovascular health
- endometriosis
- fertility and pregnancy
- health checks
- healthy living
- Indigenous health
- menopause
- mental and emotional health
- natural therapies and supplements
- polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)
- periods
- sex and sexual health
- vulva, vagina, ovaries and uterus.

Visit jeanhailes.org.au to:

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For further information contact

Jean Hailes for Women's Health
PO Box 3367
East Melbourne VIC 3002

Toll free 1800 JEAN HAILES (532 642)

Email education@jeanhailes.org.au

Website jeanhailes.org.au

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