



For Your Health

The health benefits of self-exams, and what to look out for.

by Dr. Saul Weinreb, founder of AskMyObGyn.com.

One little known fact about Women's health is the importance of self-exams, specifically in the vulva area. You may have heard how important it is to perform a monthly breast exam, but it is also important to perform a monthly exam on your vulva. It can help find and treat problems before they become serious.

In order to conduct a self-exam, find a comfortable sitting or lying position and in a well-lit area. You will also need a mirror. Start by looking for any changes in skin color (redness), swelling, dark or light spots, blisters, bumps or any other changes. Check the labia, vagina and surrounding areas.

There are many common disorders of the [vulva](#). They can range from a [yeast infection](#), to dermatitis, Vulvar dystrophy, [Vulvodynia](#) and/or [cancer](#). If you know a few facts about each kind of disorder, you can know what signs to look for and when it is important to see your OB/GYN doctor.

#### **Yeast Infection**

One of the most common types of vulvar infections is a [yeast infection](#). Although you may more likely experience a yeast infection of the vagina, the vulva may also host a yeast infection. Symptoms for infections of both areas are the same and may include redness, itching, and a whitish, clumpy discharge. A burning feeling also may occur when you urinate.

To diagnose a yeast infection, a sample of the discharge may be taken and studied under a microscope. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that good hygiene and antifungal drugs are the recommended treatments. Many of these treatments are available over-the-counter. In some cases, your doctor may prescribe a single dose that you take by mouth. If the symptoms do not go away after treatment, contact your doctor.

#### **Contact Dermatitis**

Another condition that may occur of the vulva is contact dermatitis. This is irritation of the skin of the vulva. The main symptoms of contact dermatitis are redness and itching. To diagnose it, your doctor will examine the vulva area and ask you about the things that come in contact with that area. Getting rid of the source of the irritation is the first step in treating this problem.

#### **Sexually Transmitted Infections**

You may also see a disorder of the vulva from a [sexually transmitted infection](#). The most common STI's that affect the vulva are [genital warts](#) and [genital herpes](#). Of course, the best way to reduce the chance of contracting an STI is to use a latex condom every time you have sex.

#### **Less Common Vulvar Skin Conditions**

There are several less common skin conditions of the vulva which some women may encounter, and these are usually easily treated by your doctor with creams or medication. These include Lichen Planus, Vulvar Dystrophy. Lichen Planus, can cause an itchy rash or scarring ulcers in the mouth, in the vagina, or on the vulva. It is occasionally caused by drugs and is treated with estrogen and corticosteroid creams.

Vulvar Dystrophy is the growth of abnormal skin on the vulva. The skin can be too thin (lichen sclerosus), too thick (hyperplasia), or a mixture of both. When it is too thin, the skin may look like thin, wrinkled paper, and the vaginal opening may shrink. When it is too thick, hardened patches may appear on the vulva. Symptoms include redness or whiteness, itching, and burning.

Squamous hyperplasia is characterized by discrete, thick, white elevations of skin on the vulva and the cause is unknown. It usually causes itching limited to the affected skin. Treatment involves maintaining good vulva hygiene and using corticosteroid creams.

These conditions usually require a biopsy for diagnosis, and are rarely associated with cancer of the vulva. However, some forms may require close follow up with your doctor, as some forms of vulvar dystrophy can slightly increase the risk of cancer.

#### **General Skin Problems**

Many women notice that problems that affect other parts of the body also affect the condition of their vulva. Psoriasis, for instance, is a skin disease that can appear on the vulva as red, thick, scaly patches that may itch. One of the first signs of Crohn's disease, which is ulcers that form in the digestive system, may appear as sores on the vulva. Women with diabetes often have yeast infections. In most cases, once the main disease is treated, vulva symptoms often go away as well. If not, the vulva symptoms are treated with creams or ointments.

#### **Vulvodynia**

Oftentimes, women experience a more serious and long term disorder called Vulvodynia which means "vulvar pain." The symptoms of vulvodynia include burning, stinging, irritation, or rawness. To find the cause, your doctor will ask you questions about your pain, diagnose the source, and then proceed with proper treatment.

There are many methods of treatment to relieve symptoms. No one method works all the time for all women. Vulvodynia may require long-term attention.

#### **VIN and Vulvar Cancer**

Unfortunately, although there are only five common disorders of the vulva, some women experience cancer of the vulva. Most of these are a type of skin cancer and if caught early, they are precancerous, which means it may turn into cancer if it is not found and treated early. If skin cells are found in this stage, they are called VIN (vulvar intraepithelial neoplasia). In later stages, cancer can become invasive (spread and invade other parts of the body).

Rarely, other types of cancer can develop on the vulva. There is melanoma, an advanced form of skin cancer, which can occur on the vulva. In most cases, it starts with a small, mole-like growth. The growth gets bigger, changes color, or gets darker. It may grow in an irregular—not round—shape and bleed easily. Any bumps, patches, or growths on the vulva may need to be removed.

There is also a rare cancer which can arise called Paget's disease. This cancer may look like eczema (patches of red, scaly, itchy skin) on the vulva.

Vulvar cancers most often occur in white women older than 60 years. This type of cancer occurs most often in areas of the vulva where there is chronic inflammation or VIN. Symptoms include:

- Itching of the vulva
- Burning, pain, or other discomfort in the area
- Changes in skin color (parts of the vulva can look white, red, or brown to black)

To prevent vulvar problems, it is important that you keep the area clean and dry. It is also important that you wear only cotton underwear and do not wear tight-fitting pants or underwear. When wearing pantyhose, you want to ensure that they have cotton inside. Many women experience symptoms from wearing tampons that have deodorant or a plastic coating, perfumed soap, scented toilet paper, douche or feminine sprays.

Natural and organic alternatives for these products can reduce or prevent symptoms.

Periodic self-examination is recommended by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, as is an annual doctor's examination for detection of skin changes. Women who are unable to see well can strongly benefit from using this specialized mirror. If you have any symptoms or detect signs of a problem, see your doctor.

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