

Intimate irritation

Over 50% of women will suffer from intimate vaginal irritation and discomfort at some point in their lives¹ and although it's certainly embarrassing – and itchy – it's usually nothing to worry about.

Itchiness of the vulva is likely due to thrush, sensitivity or a skin condition. The 'lips' of the vulva can be affected by conditions such as eczema and psoriasis, so don't automatically assume that if you are suffering from vulval itching that it will be thrush.

Causes of intimate irritation

For many women, sensitivity to ingredients in cosmetics and bath products can cause irritation and itching. Something as innocent as washing the area too much can also disrupt the vagina's natural pH, which is normally slightly acidic, and can cause an imbalance of naturally occurring protective bacterial flora in the vaginal area (as a change in acidity creates or allows for an overgrowth of yeast leading to irritation).

Sometimes an active sex life could lead to discomfort, as could not changing tampons regularly enough. Wearing synthetic or tight clothes can cause problems too, if the skin isn't allowed to breathe properly.

In some women, triggers for irritation can be hormonal changes such as puberty, periods or the start of the menopause, which can disturb the pH balance in the vulval area.

Other skin conditions such as eczema and psoriasis will cause severe itching and if you think you may be suffering from any of these conditions you should visit your doctor. Eczema and psoriasis affect people of all ages.

Intimate irritation - signs and symptoms

The obvious symptoms of intimate irritation will just be localised itching and discomfort. There may be some vulval soreness if you have been scratching, especially if you find you've been doing it in your sleep. Sometimes the itching is down to thrush, and you'll have one or more of the following symptoms: itching, burning, soreness, swelling of the vagina and vulva, and sometimes a thick white discharge.

Symptoms that you should speak to the doctor about.

- The symptoms of eczema vary enormously, but the first thing you'll notice if you have eczema around the genital area is itching and soreness. The skin may also become dry, scaly and flaky.
- In vulval psoriasis, the skin around the vulva usually becomes bright red, often with painful cracks. The affected area may extend to the groin and to around the back passage (the anus) and between the buttocks.

Treatments

The treatment for your intimate irritation depends on the cause. For generalised itching, a cream with anaesthetic action such as lignocaine or benzocaine works directly on the itch to stop itching, burning and irritation. These treatments should not be used long term so if your symptoms have not improved within 7-14 days, you should visit your GP. It is advisable to identify and treat the cause of the problem but if you're not sure what is causing the irritation, you should see your GP or go to your local sexual health (GUM) clinic for tests.

To relieve the discomfort of thrush, there are topical antifungal treatments such as clotrimazole or miconazole but you must ensure that the underlying internal infection is treated at the same time.

If you suspect any of the other conditions, visit your GP. You should also consult your doctor or pharmacist before using any remedies during pregnancy

Tips to help you avoid intimate irritation

There are preventative treatments which can help you to avoid intimate irritation from harsh soaps and shower gels.

Some of these contain vitamin E and are tailored to match the pH balance of the vaginal area. Others contain lactic acid to help restore balance.

Other tips to help you avoid intimate irritation include:

- Avoid perfumed soaps, shower or bath products
- Avoid tight or synthetic underwear
- Change your tampons/towels regularly during your period.

Sources:

1. <http://www.canesten.co.uk/intimate-irritation/intimate-irritation.htm>

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

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