Vaginal Dryness Is More Common Than You Think

The reduced ability of the vagina to self-lubricate is not limited to postmenopausal women.

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Many women experience vaginal dryness when menopause sets in. However, women who have not undergone menopause may also sustain a loss of moisture in their vaginal tissue, according to Women's Health Concern, a division of the British Menopause Society that provides health advice and education to women of all ages.

Located inside the vagina, the Bartholin's glands on each side of the vaginal opening lubricate the area to keep the tissue hydrated. The slightly acidic fluid produced by the glands helps to moisten and clean the vagina, remove dead cells and protect against infection. Additionally, when a woman becomes sexually excited, these glands secrete additional moisture to prepare the body for intercourse.

But almost 17% of women ages 18 to 50 experience vaginal dryness prior to menopause; 25% of women ages 50 to 59 experience dryness during sexual intercourse; and 16% find sex painful as a result of the condition.

In addition, the problem frequently affects premenopausal women whose estrogen levels have dipped, including women who are breastfeeding and women who have undergone chemotherapy or a hysterectomy—with or without their ovaries intact.

Other causes of vaginal dryness among premenopausal women are often overlooked. For example, the problem may occur when women are insufficiently turned on due to inadequate amounts of foreplay or psychological issues that dampen sexual arousal.

Vaginal dryness can also result from a woman's use of feminine hygiene products, such as cleansers, sprays and related items, as well as chemicals found in detergents and swimming pool and hot tub supplies that can interfere with vaginal health. Allergy and cold medicines and certain antidepressants may also rob vaginal tissue of moisture.

Nevertheless, treatments for the frustrating problem are available. But women should first ask their doctor for advice on the best approach for them.

Regularly applying vaginal lubricants and moisturizers—before and after sex—is the simplest solution. Other treatments include vaginal estrogen—available in a tablet, cream, gel or other form—to restore optimal function to the area. Another hormone, DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone)—available in both topical and oral form—may also help. But these remedies may cause more potent side effects that might harm women in the long run.

Women's Health Concern stresses that women should be aware that numerous effective treatments for vaginal dryness are available. Perhaps, the biggest hurdle to overcome might be in initiating a conversation about the problem with a health care provider. But such discussions are well worth the discomfort women may feel in speaking up.

To learn more about sexual and vaginal health, read "Can a Vaccine Prevent Chlamydia?" and "Check Your Medicine Cabinets."

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