

General Care of Vulval Skin

Introduction

The term 'vulva' refers to a woman's external genital organs, or the area around the vagina and the urethra (the opening from which urine is passed).

There are many conditions that can cause soreness, irritation or pain of the vulval skin. The doctor who you have seen in clinic will be able to discuss with you what is causing your symptoms.

The skin of the vulva is sensitive and can be easily irritated by everyday products, particularly if you have a diagnosed skin condition making you sore and uncomfortable.

This leaflet offers advice on how to care for your vulval skin.

Washing

- Avoid using irritant products such as soap, bubble bath, shower gel, talcum powder, cleansing wipes, perfumes, deodorants and antiseptics
- Wash the vulva once a day only. Too frequent washing may cause dryness and irritation
- Do not wash with water alone as this causes dry skin and makes itching worse
- Do not use cleansing wet wipes
- Use an emollient (see below) or soap substitute to wash with. Avoid using sponges or flannels which can irritate the skin. Instead, just use a hand
- Shower rather than bath. If baths are required, add a bath emollient to the water
- Do not use douches or use antiseptics added to bath water
- After washing gently dab the vulval area dry with a soft towel or use a hairdryer on a cool setting held well away from the skin.

Use of emollients

- Emollient (moisturising) ointments, creams or lotions should be used regularly
- An emollient will moisturise and soothe the vulval skin if it is sore, dry or itchy. A wide range of emollients are available, ranging from greasy products to creams. Avoid perfumed products. Your doctor or pharmacist may suggest a selection for you to try, and you should then choose the one that you prefer
- The emollient should be applied directly to your vulval skin with your fingers and gently rubbed in
- Emollients should be applied as often as you need, and there is no restriction on when and how much to use. They can also be used as a protective barrier prior to passing water or opening your bowels
- It can be very soothing to keep the emollient in the fridge so that on application it can cool and soothe irritated skin
- Do not apply emollients at the same time as other treatments as they can dilute their effect. Leave an interval of at least 30 minutes between application of emollients and applying other treatments
- Bland emollients such as emulsifying ointment are unlikely to cause any significant side effects unless there is an allergy to one of the ingredients

- **CAUTION:** This leaflet mentions 'emollients' (moisturisers). When paraffin-containing emollient products get in contact with dressings, clothing, bed linen or hair, there is a danger that a naked flame or cigarette smoking could cause these to catch fire. To reduce the fire risk, patients using paraffin-containing skincare or haircare products are advised to avoid naked flames completely, including smoking cigarettes and being near people who are smoking or using naked flames. It is also advisable to wash clothing and bed linen regularly, preferably daily.

Clothing

- Wear loose fitting silk or cotton underwear; wear stockings rather than tights; avoid tight fitting leggings, jeans, shorts; wear loose fitting trousers or skirts
- Do not wear underwear for sleeping
- Wear white or light colours of underwear. Dark textile dyes (black, navy) may cause an allergy; if you wash new dark underwear a few times before wearing it, it will be less likely to cause a problem.

Other measures

- Avoid the use any over-the-counter creams such as baby or nappy creams, or herbal creams
- Do not use over the counter thrush treatments. If you think you have thrush this should be confirmed by your doctor who can prescribe treatment for you
- Avoid the use of panty liners or sanitary towels where possible. Consider using tampons or try specialist low allergy products
- Avoid biological washing powders and fabric conditioners; wash your underwear separately in non-biological washing powder/gel
- Vaseline may be used as a barrier to protect your skin from swimming pool chemicals
- Avoid coloured toilet paper.

References

- Care of Vulval Skin, British Association Of Dermatologists, Patient Information Leaflet, February 2016
- Skin Conditions of the Vulva, RCOG Patient Information Leaflet 2013

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