

# What You Should Know About Pain During Intercourse

**S**exual activity is natural for women and often a source of pleasure. Some women, however, experience pain during intercourse. There are many conditions that may be the source of that pain. If you have discomfort that interferes with intercourse, discuss your symptoms with your clinician to get treatment.

## What causes pain during intercourse?

There are a number of conditions that may result in pain during intercourse. The pain can be located on the external genitals (such as superficial pain on the vulva, at the vaginal opening), inside the vagina/pelvis (deep pain in the abdominal region), or both. Some potential causes are vaginal or yeast infections, sexually transmitted infections, skin conditions, lack of sexual arousal and lubrication during sexual activity, hormonal changes, genetic factors, and vaginismus, as well as other problems.

Pain during intercourse is also associated with certain chronic conditions such as endometriosis, irritable bowel syndrome, interstitial cystitis (painful bladder syndrome), and pelvic inflammatory disease. It is the most common symptom of vulvodynia.

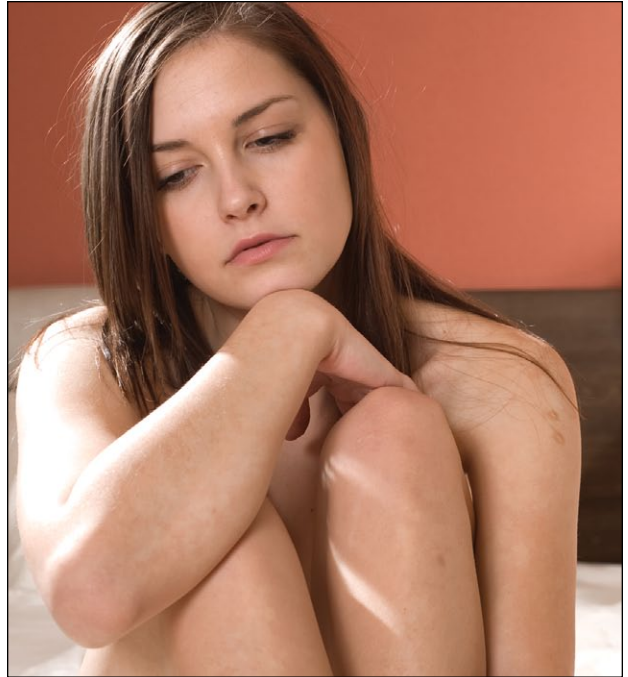
## What is vulvodynia?

Vulvodynia is superficial pain or discomfort that occurs in the absence of physical findings (that is, there is no infection or other physical problem to directly explain why pain is present). The pain can be provoked by pressure to the area (such as during sexual intercourse or tampon insertion) or it can be unprovoked (when there is no external trigger for the pain; it occurs spontaneously). The pain can also be localized to a certain area, like the vaginal opening, or generalized to the entire vulvar region.

Unfortunately, because vulvodynia occurs in the absence of physical findings, some women are incorrectly told by a clinician that there is no cause for their pain, as no infection is present to explain their symptoms. This might lead women to believe their pain is not legitimate or that it is all in their head. Vulvodynia is a real pain condition, however, with many women across the life cycle reporting this condition.

## What is vaginismus?

Women with vaginismus experience great difficulty with vaginal penetration, such as during gynecologic



exams, tampon insertion, or sexual intercourse. In some cases, vaginal penetration has never been possible. Women with this condition tend to regularly experience pain during attempts at vaginal penetration and have tension in the pelvic floor muscles (those that control voiding of the bladder and bowels). Due to this difficulty, women with vaginismus experience a great deal of fear and anxiety about vaginal penetration, which may lead them to avoid such situations.

## Is there treatment for my pain?

Your health care professional will ask you questions about your symptoms and may perform a pelvic exam. Treatment options may include medications, biofeedback therapy, anesthetic ointment, behavioral exercises, and in some cases, surgery. Some lifestyle remedies may be offered to relieve pain and itching.

## Where can I find more information on pain during intercourse?

Your clinician is one valuable source of information. In addition, some helpful websites are available from the National Vulvodynia Association ([www.nva.org](http://www.nva.org)), the International Society for the Study of Vulvovaginal Disease ([www.issvd.org](http://www.issvd.org)), and [www.vulvodynia.com](http://www.vulvodynia.com).