

Vaginal Dryness: What do I need to know?

What is vaginal dryness?

Vaginal dryness is a common problem after cancer treatment. It occurs when the vaginal walls and genital tissue becomes less lubricated and flexible. This leaves the vaginal tissue prone to tears, and makes the vulva susceptible to cracks and fissures. Vulvovaginal dryness may also affect the urinary tract and may be exacerbated by stress and the use of condoms.

What are the symptoms of vaginal dryness?

Symptoms may include pain or bleeding with sexual activity, vaginal or vulvar irritation, urinary incontinence, and burning or urgency with urination. Some women may also experience an increase bladder and urinary tract infections and watery vaginal discharge.

What causes vaginal dryness?

Vaginal dryness can be caused by many factors including age and loss of estrogen. Vaginal dryness may be precipitated by cancer treatment such as chemotherapy or pelvic radiation. Hormonal treatments can also significantly increase dryness, including for women who have already been through menopause.

Is vaginal dryness common in cancer survivors?

Changes in sexual function are reported by the majority cancer survivors and may result in sexual avoidance patterns and behaviors that affect quality of life. Vaginal dryness is one of the most common problems after cancer. Vaginal dryness due to estrogen loss may also be accompanied by urinary symptoms such as increased frequency, urgency or urinary tract infections.

Can vaginal dryness be treated?

Yes, there are multiple ways to treat vaginal dryness, including both lifestyle changes and topical local management. The goal of treatment is to alleviate symptoms and restore tissue quality. Research evidence shows that regular use of moisturizers, including non-hormonal products, are effective for relieving symptoms.

Moisturizers

Vaginal moisturizers rehydrate tissue and improve tissue quality because they are absorbed into the skin, adhere to the vaginal lining and mimic natural vaginal secretion. Moisturizers can provide long-term relief for symptoms such as itching, irritation and discomfort and help restore vulvar tissue. Moisturizers can also help balance vaginal pH levels which is important for controlling bacterial growth and lowering risk of infection. Cancer survivors may have varying degrees of dryness and may need to apply moisturizers more often than what is recommended to address their symptoms. Moisturizing at least 3 to 5 times per week is ideal; this should include vaginal application and moisturizing external tissues (vulva). Using your fingertip, a small amount should also be applied to the inner vaginal lips, clitoris, and opening to the vagina. Moisturizers should always be applied at bedtime for the best absorption.

Replens	Bio adhesive gel that binds directly to vaginal cells and is fragrance free.
Emerita Personal Feminine Moisturizer	Paraben-free. No mineral oil, or petroleum. No animal testing. Water-based, unscented, flavorless, and non-staining With Vitamin E, Aloe Vera Gel, Chamomile and Calendula.
PrevaLeaf Oasis	Concentrated water-based cream that is pH balanced for the vagina. Paraben- and fragrance-free
Ah! Yes Moisturizing Gel	Water-based, pH balanced gel that is paraben- and glycerin-free. No stickiness, fragrance, color, taste or residue.
Good Clean Love: RESTORE	Accurately bio-matches healthy pH, salt balance, and lactobacilli action, petroleum, glycerin, and paraben free, condom compatible, vegan

Hyalo- GYN	Hyaluronic acid-based moisturizer, found to be comparably effective to vaginal estrogen. Colorless, odorless, transparent, aqueous, hydrating gel. It acts as a moisturizer and lubricant. May also be applied externally to moisturize vulva.
Revaree	Hyaluronic acid-based vaginal insert, found to be comparably effective to vaginal estrogen. Relieves vaginal dryness, itching and discomfort.

Via	Hyaluronic acid-based moisturizer, found to be comparably effective to vaginal estrogen. Product is a cream applied with silicone applicator, Also contains, Vitamin E and jojoba oil.
Good Clean Love: BioNourish	Combination Water/Hyaluronic Acid-based moisturizer. Hypoallergenic, No parabens, petrochemicals, glycerin or artificial fragrance.
Gynatrof	Water/hyaluronic acid-based moisturizer with vitamin E, glycerin and fragrance free, reusable applicator, vegan.

Topical Treatment Options

Lubricants

Lubricants can enhance a woman’s own lubrication and temporarily relieve dryness during sexual activity. Lubricants reduce friction and protect against sexual pain by decreasing pressure on the genitals. Water- or silicone-based lubricants are recommended. Caution should be taken with warming or scented lubricants, as they may irritate estrogen-deprived vaginal tissue. In general, undisclosed chemical “flavors” or fragrances may be irritating for sensitive tissue. It generally makes sense to use a lubricant that is simpler, with fewer harsh chemicals. For women who are sensitive to yeast infections, they should avoid glycerin-based products which break down to a sugar and promote yeast growth, or flavored lubricants, which may have sugar in them. Avoid petroleum-based products because they can be irritating, damage condoms and diaphragms and can increase risk of infection.

Water-based: These lubricants are widely available and with the greatest range of textures (e.g., gel, cream, lotion). They may get sticky quickly, but you can add a spray of water to revive the slickness. Water-based products are easy to clean off, safe with condoms, and safe to use internally, externally, and with vibrators and dilators.

Silicone-based: These lubricants offer a slicker feel and do not get sticky. They are not water-soluble, which means they are not absorbed by skin and therefore last longer than water-based lubricants. When used externally, they must be washed off the skin. They do not generally cause irritation or allergic reactions. Silicone-based lubes should not be used with silicone/ rubber toys or silicone dilators because they can break down the rubber over time.

Hybrid-Lubes: There are lubricants that are a mix of both water-and silicone-base. They have a natural feel and also last longer because of the silicone. Like other silicone-based lubes, hybrid lubes should not be used with silicone sex toys or dilators

We recommend staying away from Oil-based lubricants such as petroleum jelly and mineral oil because they can cause vaginal irritation and can damage latex condoms and rubber sex toys.

Lubricants

Water-based	
Slippery stuff	Formerly known as Femglide, paraben and glycerin free
Astroglide (gel, liquid)	Available in preservative-free (methylparaben free) and glycerin-free (for diabetics)
Good Clean Love: Almost Naked Organic Lubricant	95% organic ingredients, glycerin free, paraben/petrochemical free, vegan, condom compatible
Pre-seed	Marketed as “fertility friendly” because it mimics fertile fluids and supports sperm quality. Less irritating than other lubricants.
Sliquid	Organic, glycerin and paraben free, botanically infused, vegan
Pjur med: Sensitive glide	Glycerin, paraben, and preservative free
PINK Water	Unscented, hypoallergenic, paraben free, glycerin free, flavor free, safe for all toys
Silicone- based	
ID Millennium	Less drying than other lubricants. Can be used with latex condoms
Pjur med: Premium glide	Can be used with latex condoms

PINK Silicone	Unscented, glycerin free, paraben free, Can be used with condoms
KY True Feel	Long lasting, natural feel, contains: glycerin, propylene glycol, maltodextrin, honey, methylparaben, sucralose