

# Dyspareunia

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## What is dyspareunia?

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- Dyspareunia is the medical term for pain or discomfort during intercourse.
- It can affect men but is more common in women.
- For women there are two types of dyspareunia - superficial and deep. Although it is possible for both to be present, usually women find their dyspareunia is predominantly one or the other:
  - superficial dyspareunia** - This is pain felt at or around the vaginal entrance
  - deep dyspareunia** - This is pain on deep penetration, which is often felt with pelvic thrusting during intercourse.
- Dyspareunia is a common condition and various treatment options are available. However, many women put up with painful sex because they are too embarrassed or scared to seek treatment.
- If left untreated, a negative cycle can occur where repeated painful sex can lead to a fear of pain, leading to avoidance of sexual activity, lack of arousal, failure to achieve orgasm and loss of sexual desire. Difficulties in your relationship may also arise as a result. It is therefore important to seek early treatment.

## Symptoms of dyspareunia

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- Superficial dyspareunia - this is sore and instant, usually beginning at the start of sexual intercourse. The pain may also feel sharp or burning. It is usually quickly relieved by stopping penetration although you may be sore to the touch afterwards for a little while.
- Deep dyspareunia - this refers to pain felt deeper in the pelvis during or after intercourse, usually felt when pelvic thrusting. It may be sharp or dull, may stop when penetration stops, or can continue for minutes or even hours.

- Some women may experience severe tightening of the vaginal muscles with penetration, a condition called vaginismus (refer to separate hand out, available from the therapist).
- Pain may not only be felt on sexual stimulation, but can be present all the time and triggered by non-sexual activities such as walking.
- The level of pain felt can range from mild to severe. In severe cases, penetrative sex is impossible.

## What causes dyspareunia?

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- Dyspareunia can have many causes, including:
  - illness
  - infection
  - a physical problem
  - a psychological problem.
- Some common causes include:
  - an infection: thrush or a sexually transmitted infection (STI), such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea or genital herpes
  - vaginal dryness (usually due to the menopause, where changing hormone levels can make your vagina dry)
  - lack of sexual arousal at any age
  - vaginismus: a condition where muscles in or around the vagina shut tightly, making sex painful or impossible
  - genital irritation or allergy caused by spermicides, latex condoms or products such as soap and shampoo.
- Deep dyspareunia may also be a normal response to pressure on sensitive internal parts. The woman's position during sexual intercourse is important, because deep thrusting by the partner may hit an ovary and cause pain.

- Other causes may include:
  - pelvic inflammatory disease
  - endometriosis - where the tissue lining of the uterus grows outside the uterus causing deep pain during sex
  - irritable bowel syndrome
  - muscle contraction of the pelvic floor.
- Dyspareunia occurs most frequently in:
  - those who are sexually inexperienced (particularly if their partners are also inexperienced)
  - those who are peri or post-menopausal.
- Other psychological factors may include:
  - psychological trauma, often stemming from a past history of sexual abuse or trauma. Many women who have been raped or sexually abused as children have dyspareunia
  - guilt, anxiety or tension regarding sex.

## Treatment/management

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- Treatment will vary according to the nature of the dyspareunia.
- Dyspareunia typically has a physical cause and can be treated or controlled with medical care. This may include antifungal medication that can be given for vaginal yeast infections or antibiotics for sexually transmitted diseases.
- If vaginal dryness is causing the pain, you may be advised to try using a lubricating product such as SYLK to ease penetration – remember to use a water-based product if you're using condoms, because oil-based lubricants can damage them and make them ineffective.

You can learn to relax your pelvic muscles during penetration by gently introducing a dilator (also referred to as a trainer – see separate handout "Using Vaginal Dilators", available from your therapist).

- Dilators come in a range of increasing sizes, giving you total control. As you progress through the dilators your confidence will grow, until you are able to involve your partner with its use, followed by the insertion of his penis. Remember - you are in control.
- Psychological therapy may also be recommended
  - Desensitisation therapy involves learning vaginal relaxation exercises that can decrease pain. Your therapist may recommend pelvic floor exercises to decrease pain with intercourse.
  - Cognitive behavioural therapy can also be helpful in changing negative thought patterns and behaviours.
  - Mindfulness involves training the mind to focus on what is happening in the moment, rather than making judgements or focusing on distractions that interfere with attention to sexual sensations.
- For deep dyspareunia, using a different position for intercourse may help.
  - Being on top can give the woman more control of penetration.
  - Try another position which gives more control over depth of penis penetration.

## Frequently asked questions

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**Q:** Does the pain have to have been present for my entire sexual life?

**A:** No. There are two types of dyspareunia. Lifelong/primary dyspareunia means that the individual has always experienced pain during sex during their whole sexual life. However, Acquired / secondary dyspareunia begins after a period of pain-free sexual function.

**Q:** Is dyspareunia treatable?

**A:** With treatment, the chance of overcoming dyspareunia and having an enjoyable sexual life is good. Treatment can take several months however.

**Q:** If I have a partner, will they be involved in any treatment?

**A:** It is usually very helpful to meet your partner and talk with you together about the problem and how they can help.

**Q:** Is it normal to experience pain the first time I have sexual intercourse?

**A:** Most women find their first experience of sexual intercourse uncomfortable or painful. This usually gets better with experience.

## Useful addresses / contacts

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### NHS information

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/vulvodynia/>

### Vulval Pain Society

Website-<http://www.vulvalpainsociety.org/vps/>

Email- [info@vulvapainsociety.org](mailto:info@vulvapainsociety.org)

Address- VPS

PO Box 7804

Nottingham

NG3 5ZQ

### National Vulvodynia Association

<http://www.nva.org/>

### Pelvic Pain Support Network

Website- <http://www.pelvicpain.org.uk>

Email- [info@pelvicpain.org.uk](mailto:info@pelvicpain.org.uk)

Address- 21, Stourpaine Rd,

Poole

Dorset

BH17 9AT

### RELATE

Website-<http://www.relateleicestershire.org.uk/>

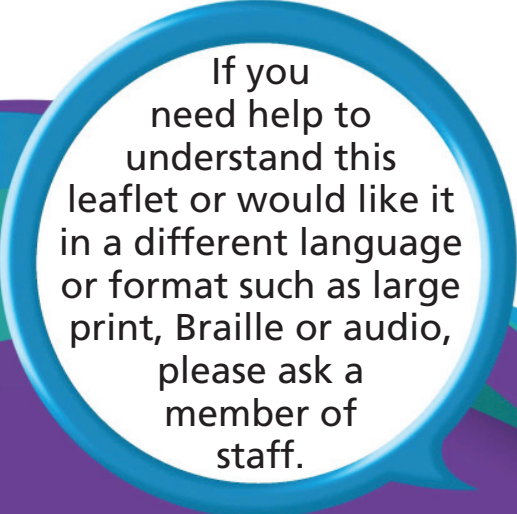
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