



DANA-FARBER/BRIGHAM AND WOMEN'S CANCER CENTER

Vaginal dryness & pain during intercourse

Understanding Vaginal dryness & pain during intercourse

Vaginal dryness, including chafing, irritation, and tightness, is common after undergoing cancer treatment. This may be directly caused by cancer treatments or due to premature (early) menopause because of the treatments. Vaginal dryness can also make sexual activity painful. When sex hurts, sexual interest often quickly diminishes. Topical hormonal creams are generally not recommended and typical pain medications probably won't help, but there are several options for treating this problem. Vaginal dryness may be addressed by using both vaginal moisturizers and vaginal lubricants.

- **Vaginal moisturizers** provide longer-term relief and are available in gels, creams, tablets, or liquid beads. These products provide a smooth layer of moisture that adheres to the vaginal tissue and improves the vaginal pH. They are applied with a slim applicator or a vaginal suppository two or more times a week. Using your fingertip, a small amount should also be applied to external tissue including the inner vaginal lips, clitoris, and opening to the vagina. Best absorption occurs when used prior to bedtime.
 - Moisturizers are non-hormonal and available over-the-counter (without a prescription). Examples include brand names Replens, Luvena, or Hyalo-Gyn.
- **Vaginal lubricants** provide a temporary slick coating to reduce friction during sexual activity. Lubricant should be applied in the vagina and around the genitals immediately before sexual activity.
 - Water-based lubricants without perfumes or other irritants are best and wash away more easily. Examples include brand names Astroglide, Liquid Silk, Good Clean Love, or Slippery Stuff.
 - Silicone-based lubricants last longer than water-based products because they are not absorbed by the skin. However, silicone lubricants should not be used with silicone toys or silicone vaginal dilators because they can break down the rubber over time. Silicone lubricants include Pink, P-jur, and KY True Feel.
 - Avoid Petroleum-based lubricants because they can irritate tissue, damage condoms and diaphragms, and can increase risk of infection.
 - Also, best to avoid glycerin-based lubricants because glycerin can act like a sugar and promote yeast infection.
 - **TIP:** Use soaps and bubble baths sparingly, because they can dry vaginal tissue.



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- **Pain during sex** can distract you from enjoying the experience. To reduce your pain, try to:
 - Plan sexual activity for times when your pain level is lower than others
 - Take pain medicine an hour before planned sexual activity so it has time to take effect. (If your medicines make you sleepy, work with your doctor to adjust the dosage.)
 - Tell your partner what parts of your body are particularly sensitive
 - Find positions that put as little pressure on sensitive areas as possible

If vaginal moisturizers or lubricants are not providing enough relief, talk with your doctor about other types of treatment. Sometimes it is appropriate to use some topical hormonal treatments, and this can be considered on a case-by-case basis.