

Painful Intercourse

What causes pain during sexual intercourse?

There are many possible causes of pain during sexual intercourse. The medical term for painful intercourse is dyspareunia.

You may feel pain at the opening of your vagina or in the vulva, which is the area around the vaginal opening. Even a gentle touch in this area may cause pain. This pain or sensitivity can be caused by:

- infection
- irritation from soaps, spermicides, or other chemicals
- a change in the skin of the vulva called vulvar dystrophy, such as a problem called lichen sclerosis.

Pain during sex can be caused by vaginal dryness. Possible causes of vaginal dryness are:

- a lack of natural lubrication resulting from not enough foreplay
- hormonal changes such as those that happen during breast-feeding or during or after menopause
- psychological factors that affect your level of sexual arousal, such as unpleasant or hurtful sexual experiences in the past.

Examples of other problems that can cause pain in the vaginal or vulvar area are:

- Bartholin's gland cyst, a swelling of one of the two small glands near the opening of the vagina
- Scarring of tissues torn or cut during childbirth or vaginal or pelvic.

Sometimes the muscles at the opening of the vagina tighten and narrow or even close the opening. This condition, called vaginismus, causes another type of pain and the penis may not be able to enter the vagina. Your provider can tell you how to do exercises that can help to relax the muscles of the area. Psychological factors such as a fear of intercourse or fear of being hurt may cause the vaginal muscles to tighten.

You may feel pain deep inside your vagina during sexual intercourse. This can be caused by problems such as:

- pelvic or vaginal infection
- growths in the uterus called fibroids
- ovarian cysts (fluid-filled sacs in or on an ovary)
- endometriosis, an abnormal growth of uterine tissue outside the uterus
- prolapsed uterus, meaning the uterus has moved from its normal position down into your vagina
- infections of the bladder
- injury to the vagina from childbirth, rape, or sexual abuse.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about the pain. You may have a pelvic exam to look for infection or other problems.

How is it treated?

Your treatment will depend on the cause of the pain. If you have an infection, your health care provider will prescribe medicine for it.

If vaginal dryness is the cause, your provider may recommend using a water-based lubricant every day or every time you have sex to decrease pain or discomfort. Lubricants can be purchased at a drugstore. During or after menopause, an estrogen cream put on the vaginal area may help.

Depending on the cause, other possible treatments include counseling or surgery.

How can I take care of myself?

- If you have itching, burning, pain, or other symptoms of irritation or infection of your genital area, see your health care provider. Follow the treatment prescribed or recommended by your provider.
- Use a water-based vaginal lubricant when you have sex.
- Avoid using soaps, spermicides, or other chemicals that can irritate the skin of your genital area.
- Talk to your partner about what might help to increase your readiness for sex.
- If psychological or emotional problems appear to be contributing to the problem, see a therapist or marriage counselor.

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