

Caring for the Vulva

Healthy skin over the vulva is critical for normal daily activities like sitting, walking, and wearing clothing. If the vulvar skin is unhealthy, you may have difficulty with urination, menstruation, and sex. The goal of this handout is to provide some tips that will help keep you comfortable and maintain healthy vulvar skin.

The skin of the vulva and vagina are similar in texture to the skin inside your mouth or inside your eyelids. In the same way that you would not use abrasive treatments or scrub these areas, try to be gentle when you care for the skin of the vulva. Most often, vulvar discomfort is not due to being unclean or having an infection; **washing excessively and using soaps or over the counter antimicrobial treatments are not recommended.**

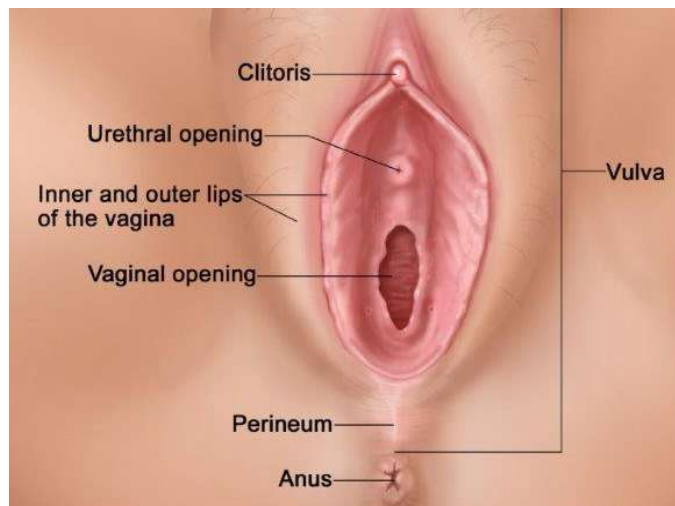
Cleaning “dos and don’ts”

Do	Don’t
• Wash regularly with plain warm water • If there is irritation/rash/pain, try a daily “Sitz bath” – a short soak in plain, lukewarm water • Try a spray bottle instead of toilet paper for cleaning after urinating/defecating • Gently pat dry with a clean cloth or towel • Moisturize! (More on moisturizing below)	• Expose the skin to very hot water • Excessively rub or scrub the skin • Use soaps, bubble bath, bath salts, etc. • Scrub with facecloths • Use a hairdryer • Use feminine wipes, pH washes, etc • Use fabric softeners and scented detergents

Moisturizers for the vulva

It is safe and healthy to moisturize the skin of the vulva. Many women will need extra moisture if they have low levels of estrogen (ex. after menopause), which makes the skin in this area thin and easily irritated. After cleaning with water, dry gently by patting with a cloth/towel and then use a moisturizer **on these parts of the vulva: outside lips, inside lips all the way up to the clitoris, and perineum (see diagram).** Options for moisturizers include:

- Plain Vaseline (aka petroleum jelly)
- Glaxal base cream
- Zinc oxide or aquaphor creams if you have incontinence
- Over the counter vaginal moisturizers (creams/gels or suppositories that you place in the vagina) – ex. Replens, Zestica, Repagyn, Gynatrof (none of these contain hormones)



Other tips

Avoid underwear or clothing that are tight and will rub on the skin. Consider using a menstrual cup, tampons, or reusable menstrual cloth pad/underwear, instead of pads for bleeding or leaking of urine (most disposable pads are irritating to the vulva).

Use lubricant during sex! Water or silicone based lubricants both work well; avoid products that are scented, edible, or have cooling/warming sensations. You can also use mineral oil or coconut oil, but they often do not work as well as lubricants.

Avoid waxing or shaving your pubic hair. If you must groom, trimming the hair is less irritating.

Treatments for vulvar conditions

If you suspect you have an infection, please see your doctor. It is best to diagnose infections with swabs before treatment. Sometimes recurrent infections can be treated without seeing a doctor, but it is best to prove infection with a swab or other test.

If you are menopausal, your doctor may recommend using estrogen on the vulva/in the vagina to encourage moisture, blood flow, and thickness/elasticity in these tissues. Vaginal estrogen is extremely safe and is minimally absorbed. It comes in creams, tablets, or a ring.

It is common for women to have skin conditions on the vulvar skin, such as eczema, “lichen” (several different types), psoriasis, etc. These often require treatment with steroid ointments, which would be prescribed by your doctor.

If you ever notice sores, areas of thickness and rawness, or any other concerning appearance on your vulva, please ask a doctor to examine you. Sometimes a biopsy is needed.

Other resources

- YouTube video by Dr. Muna Alkhaifi (“Vulvar Care – Muna Alkhaifi” on YouTube): <https://youtu.be/y7IduFLIZQ0>
- Patient handouts from the International Society for the Study of Vulvovaginal Disease (ISSVD): <https://www.issvd.org/category/non-member/patients/>
 - The normal vulva: <https://www.issvd.org/the-normal-vulva/>
 - Genital care: <https://www.issvd.org/genital-care-for-women/>
- Podcast by Dr. Amanda Selk about vulvar care and several different vulvar problems: The Vulva Diaries