

General Care of the Vulval Skin

The aim of this leaflet is to provide you with some general advice about caring for your vulval skin. This can help relieve some of the common symptoms and help prevent a flare of symptoms in the future. You should continue soap substitutes and emollients (moisturisers) for life but only use medications as instructed.

What is the Vulva?

The 'vulva' is the term used to describe the visible part of the female genitalia. This includes the mons pubis (mound at the top covered by pubic hair), the clitoris, the inner and outer labia (lips), the urethra (the tube which passes urine) and the vaginal opening.

The vulva is covered in skin and so can also be affected by a variety of skin conditions, just like other areas of your body.

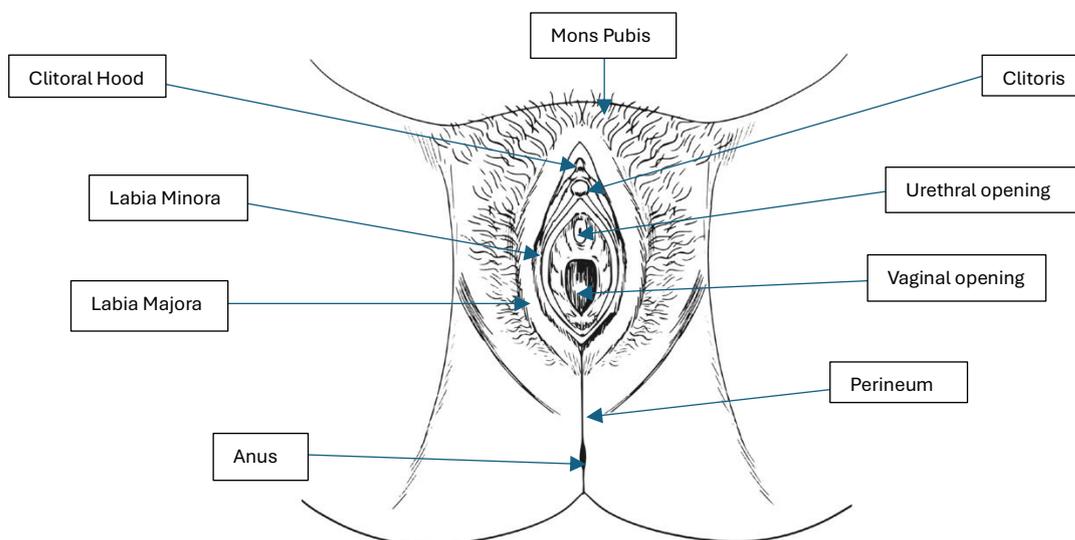


Figure One- The Vulva ⁽¹⁾

Caring for my Vulva

Vulval skin is extremely sensitive and can become irritated by everyday products. Irritants include fragranced washing powders and fabric conditioners, toilet wipes, coloured or scented toilet paper, shower gels and soaps, deodorants, talcum

powders and some feminine hygiene products. Please try to avoid using any of these products on the vulva. Even products advertised specifically for feminine areas or as 'skin' friendly should be avoided. Many of these chemicals and preservatives that can irritate your vulva and strip it of its natural protection⁽²⁾⁽³⁾.

It may be beneficial to wash underwear in non-biological washing powder and avoid fabric conditioners. An extra wash cycle may also help get rid of any extra residue from the washing products. Wear loose fitting clothing, cotton or silk underwear (dark textiles contain dyes that can cause allergies) and replace tights with stockings⁽²⁾⁽³⁾.

Avoid waxing, shaving or using hair removal creams as these can all irritate the skin. Trimming is best if you need to remove the pubic hair.

If you are still having regular periods, all cotton pads and tampons, menstrual cups, or menstrual underwear 'period pants', can sometimes cause less irritation than regular pads and pantyliners. Avoid switching brands frequently, and ensure you change the products regularly to minimise moisture. Period pants may also be helpful if you have continence problems and wearing regular pads is causing irritation.

Washing my Vulva

Wash your vulva once a day using a soap substitute such as Dermol or your everyday emollient such as Hydramol. Apply a small amount to the skin with water, then wash off. This will leave the skin feeling less dry and irritated⁽²⁾. Try to wash your hair separately (such as over the bath) as the products used can aggravate your vulval skin, even in the shower. Avoid using flannels/wash cloths as these can also irritate, just use your hand or a handheld shower head. Allow the area to air dry, pat gently with a towel (don't rub) or use a hair dryer on a cool setting and hold well away from the skin⁽³⁾.

Moisturising my Vulva

We recommend moisturising the vulval skin 4-5 times a day with an unscented emollient (moisturiser) to help soothe, protect, act as a barrier and prevent flare ups of any skin conditions. Do this even when you have no symptoms. Keep trying various emollients until you find one you like⁽³⁾. There are plenty to choose from including Hydramol, Balneum plus, Diprobase, Aveeno, Epaderm, 50:50. If your skin is feeling irritated, keeping your moisturiser in the fridge and using cool can help soothe your skin. You can use your moisturiser as often as you need there is no restriction. Some people find using it before and after going to the toilet helps if the skin is particularly sore or if it stings when you pass urine. It may be helpful to keep a travel sized pot in your handbag so you can use when at work or out and about.

Treatments for my Vulva

You may have already tried various creams or tablets with no benefit, without seeking help and may be feeling low. We will try and find the best treatment for you, but this can occasionally take time. It can sometimes take several weeks for a treatment to control your symptoms. It is important to persist with treatments even if you are not seeing an immediate effect. We cannot always cure your symptoms, but we can help ease them and keep them under control.

We may have prescribed you a steroid ointment to use, it is important to use this as instructed by your doctor. **Do not be alarmed if the leaflet within the steroid box states not to be used on the genital area- it is safe to do so under medical supervision.**

Antihistamines (anti itch) tablets can be used, especially at nighttime as itch tends to be worse at this time⁽³⁾.

Self-help like distraction, mindfulness, and relaxation techniques can be beneficial, especially when the urge to scratch starts. Applying an ice pack wrapped in a towel or a damp cloth can soothe and relieve the symptoms, but do not apply ice directly to the skin.

How to Examine My Vulva

Similarly to other parts of our body's, vulvas are different from person to person, as well as at different stages of our lives. It is important to get to know the normal appearance of your vulva, so you know when to consult your doctor if you have any concerning changes. One way to do this is by performing a regular vulval self-examination⁽⁴⁾.

- Find a private place when you have time to relax
- Use a mirror so you can see clearly
- Start at the top (the mons pubis, where pubic hair grows) gently touch and feel as well as look at the skin. Work your way down, checking the clitoris, the outer and inner lips, the vaginal opening, and the perineum (area between the vaginal opening and the anus)
- Look for any changes in the colour of the skin, thickening of the skin, any new lumps, or bumps (such as warts or skin tags), any ulcers or sores⁽⁴⁾

Do's

- Apply emollient regularly throughout the day to soothe, protect and act as a barrier
- Wear loose fitting clothing, cotton or silk underwear
- Sleep without underwear
- Keep nails short if scratching is happening when sleeping
- Remove exercise clothing and bathing suits as soon as possible
- Leave 15-30 minutes between moisturising and applying other treatments
- Talk to your doctor if your symptoms are causing sexual dysfunction

Don'ts

- Wear tight fitting clothing such as tights, leggings, jeans
- Avoid washing with water only
- Avoid shaving or waxing the area (trim if necessary)
- Avoid vaginal douching
- Avoid overheating (baths and showers that are too hot/ electric blankets)
- Avoid over the counter remedies
- Avoid spermicidal lubricated condoms
- Avoid hot tubs, regular swimming (apply a barrier cream prior)

- Certain sports such as horse riding, cycling can put direct pressure on the vulva and make symptoms worse

References

1. https://www.bradfordhospitals.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/22041403-vulval-care_.pdf
2. <https://cdn.bad.org.uk/uploads/2021/11/19174105/Vulval-skincare-PIL-May-2023.pdf>
3. <https://www.rcog.org.uk/for-the-public/browse-our-patient-information/skin-conditions-of-the-vulva/>
4. <https://bssvd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/VSE-Brochure-.pdf>

This leaflet can be formally translated on request via our Patient Experience Team, although response times to have information translated can vary. To request formal translation services or if you would like to make any suggestions or comments about the content of this leaflet, please contact the Patient Experience Team on 0151 702 4353 or by email at pals@lwh.nhs.uk

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Issue Date: 01/03/2019

Reference: Gyn_2025-231-v3

Review Date: 02/04/2028

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