

Vaginal Dryness

Vaginal dryness is a common symptom in women with low levels of estrogen. This can be caused by certain medications, including chemotherapy, hormone therapy or chemoprevention. It can also be caused by menopause that occurs naturally, or that has been induced by surgery, chemotherapy or radiation. Symptoms of vaginal dryness include itching and burning. Vaginal dryness can also be the underlying cause of painful intercourse.

Estrogen replacement is a common treatment for vaginal dryness, but it may not be the first choice for some women. The non-hormonal treatment alternative is to use a vaginal moisturizer on a regular basis, combined with a vaginal lubricant as needed to make vaginal penetration easier. This information sheet describes how to select and use these products.

Vaginal Moisturizers

- Use regularly
- Designed to keep the lining of the vagina moisturized

Vaginal Lubricants

- Use as needed
- Designed to reduce friction during sexual activity

Vaginal Moisturizers

Vaginal moisturizers supply moisture to the lining of the vagina. These products are designed for regular use to maintain moisture. Vaginal moisturizers are helpful for symptoms of soreness, itching, burning and other discomfort caused by dryness.

Moisturizers are available without a prescription. Most moisturizers come in the form of a gel, liquid or cream (inserted into the vagina with a tampon-shaped applicator) or a suppository that is placed inside the vagina. The moisturizer is absorbed gradually into the vaginal lining.

How to Use

Vaginal moisturizers are designed for regular use and are most effective if used on a regular schedule. Start by applying every three days (or as directed), and then apply more or less frequently as needed to manage your symptoms. Follow the package instructions for application.

If you are using a vaginal moisturizer for the first time, you will have more vaginal discharge than is usual for you. This is usually caused by the elimination of dead skin cells and should subside within a week or two. It may be helpful to apply just before bedtime to minimize leakage. Wear a panty-liner or mini-pad to absorb excess moisturizer.

Examples of Vaginal Moisturizers

- Replens[®] (gel with applicator)
- Hyalo GYN[®] (gel with applicator)
- Luvena (gel with applicator)
- Me Again[™] (gel with applicator)

Vaginal Lubricants

Vaginal lubricants can make sexual activity easier and more comfortable. They are designed to be used as needed. Lubricants have a very slippery texture, and many are designed to feel like a woman's natural moisture. If you already use a vaginal moisturizer, you may also use a vaginal lubricant for sexual activity or any time additional lubrication is needed for comfort.

How to Use

Apply liberally to the genital area shortly before sexual activity, making sure to cover the inner labia, clitoral area and any parts that feel dry or “tug” during sex. If you plan to have intercourse or penetration, be sure to lubricate the vaginal entrance well, and also lubricate your or your partner's fingers, penis or sex toy. Re-apply as needed during sexual activity.

Understanding the Ingredients

There are a large number of vaginal lubricants on the market. Look at the ingredient list before deciding which lubricant to buy. Here are some general guidelines for choosing a lubricant.

Water-based lubricants include popular brands such as Astroglide[®] and K-Y[®] Liquid. Since water evaporates, these lubricants may need to be reapplied during sexual activity. They can also be “reactivated” with a small amount of water. Many water-based lubricants contain glycerin (see below), which can make the product longer lasting. Water-based lubricants are the best choice for use with silicone dilators or sex toys.

Silicone-based lubricants (look for dimethicone or cyclomethicone in the ingredient list) are longer lasting than water-based lubricants, since they do not evaporate. However, they tend to be more expensive, and they do not wash away as easily as water-based lubricants. Silicone-based lubricants can even be used underwater, although you should avoid using them in the shower and tiled areas because they will make hard surfaces extremely slippery, causing falls. Silicone-based lubricants are safe to use with latex condoms. However, **do not use** silicone-based lubricants with dilators or sex toys made from silicone, as they can degrade the material over time.



When choosing a lubricant, also **be aware of the following ingredients**. Not all women will react the same way to any given ingredient, but certain common ingredients have caused side effects in some women. When using a new lubricant, test a small quantity first on the inner thigh to learn how your body responds.

Glycerin is sometimes added to water-based lubricants to make them longer lasting. However, it may be irritating to women with very sensitive skin. It is also thought that glycerin can increase the risk of yeast infections in certain women who are already prone to them.

Parabens (e.g., methylparaben, butylparaben) are preservatives used in many cosmetics and personal care products. They may be irritating to some women with sensitive skin.

Perfumes and flavoring agents: In general, perfumes are not recommended for sensitive skin because they may cause irritation. Flavored lubricants, which are designed for oral stimulation, are not as likely to present a problem. However, they should be tested on a small area first.

“Warming” agents (menthol, L-arginine, etc.): Some women enjoy the sensation of “warming liquids,” but on delicate skin these can be irritating and should be used with caution. Those with L-arginine can also trigger an outbreak in women with genital herpes.

Propylene glycol is a skin conditioning agent that may cause irritation in women with vulvodynia.

Table 1. Vaginal Lubricants

Name	Texture	Water-based	Silicone-based	Contains Glycerin	Contains Parabens
Astroglide	Liquid	X		X	X
Astroglide Glycerin & Paraben Free	Liquid	X			
ID Glide	Liquid	X		X	X
ID Millenium	Liquid		X		
K-Y Personal Lubricant	Liquid or gel	X		X	X
Liquid Silk*	Creamy liquid	X			X
Pink	Liquid		X		
Please Cream*	Creamy liquid	X			
Sliquid Organics	Liquid	X			
Slippery Stuff	Liquid	X			X
Wet Naturals Silky Supreme	Gel		X		
Wet Platinum	Liquid		X		

* Contains a small amount of silicone, safe to use with silicone dilators



Avoid the Use of...

Avoid the following, as they may increase vaginal dryness or irritation:

- Vinegar, yogurt or other douches (if you have had a vaginal reconstruction, douching may be appropriate; however, first consult your health care provider)
- Hand lotions, perfume, powder, deodorant and soaps in the vaginal area
- Bubble baths
- Tight clothing, synthetic fabrics and tampons (some panty liners can also irritate the pelvic area)

Petroleum- or mineral oil-based products, such as Vaseline and baby oil, are **not recommended** for use inside the vagina. Though long lasting, these products do not wash away easily, which can promote infection. They can also break down latex condoms.

The following medications can contribute to vaginal dryness and should be avoided if possible.

- Antihistamines (long-term use), such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl[®]) or chlorpheniramine (Chlor-Trimeton[®])
- Decongestants (long-term use), such as pseudoephedrine (Sudafed[®])

Be cautious if using complementary and alternative medicines to relieve menopausal symptoms. People should not assume that plant estrogens or “natural” supplements are safe. Some herbal or other “natural” ingredients to relieve menopausal symptoms may contain hormones, act as hormones in the body or promote hormonal production. Talk with your health care provider before using any dietary supplement, herb, vitamin or mineral. For more information, see the patient information sheet “Menopause.”

When to See Your Health Care Provider

- If the above remedies do not help or your problem increases within 1-3 months.
- If there is a persistent itching that does not resolve. This may be a symptom of other problems.
- If any bleeding occurs with the dryness.

Prescription medications may be considered in certain cases if above measures do not work. However, these treatments may not be appropriate for all women. Talk with your health care provider to discuss possible risks, benefits and alternatives.

Resources

The following websites sell sexual health products and ship in discreet packaging. Be sure to check an online seller’s reputation before you make a purchase.

- Drugstore.com (<http://www.drugstore.com>): Look for the “Sexual Well-Being” tab.
- Amazon.com (<http://www.amazon.com>): Look in its Health and Wellness Department.
- Good Vibrations (<http://www.goodvibes.com>)
- A Woman’s Touch (<http://www.awomanstouchonline.com>)
- MyPleasure (<http://www.mypleasure.com>)
- Too Timid (<http://www.tootimid.com>)
- HyaloGYN vaginal moisturizer (<http://www.hyalogyn.com>)
- Yes Yes Yes lubricants (<http://www.yesyesyes.org>)