

Atrophic vaginitis

Patient information

Atrophic vaginitis or vaginal atrophy is the thinning of the walls of the vagina caused by decreased oestrogen levels. Women with atrophic vaginitis have a greater chance of chronic vaginal infections and urinary problems. It can also make sexual intercourse painful.

What are the symptoms?

In some women, symptoms occur during peri-menopause, or the years leading up to the menopause. In other women, symptoms may not appear until years later, if ever.

Symptoms can include:

- Thinning of the vaginal walls
- Shortening and tightening of the vaginal canal
- Lack of vaginal moisture (vaginal dryness)
- Vaginal burning (inflammation)
- Spotting of blood after intercourse (always see your GP for advice if this occurs)
- Discomfort or pain during intercourse (regular sexual activity helps to keep vaginal tissues healthy)
- Pain or burning with urination
- More frequent urinary tract infections
- Urinary incontinence (involuntary leakage)
- Urinary frequency

Am I at risk?

- Women who have never given birth vaginally are more prone to vaginal atrophy.
- Smoking impairs blood circulation, depriving the vagina and other tissues of oxygen. Tissue thinning occurs where blood flow has decreased.
- Taking tamoxifen (a treatment for breast cancer) can also put you at greater risk.

What are the potential complications?

Atrophic vaginitis increases a woman's risk of contracting vaginal infections. The acidic environment of the vagina changes, making it easier for bacteria, yeast and other organisms to thrive. It also increases the risk of urinary system atrophy (urogenital atrophy). Symptoms such as the frequent need to urinate or an urgent need to pass urine can occur, along with a burning sensation during and after urination. Some women may have incontinence and experience more urinary tract infections.

Treatment

It is possible to improve your vaginal health and your quality of life. Specific over the counter moisturisers or water-based lubricants can help treat dryness. If symptoms are severe, your doctor may recommend a topical oestrogen (This can be used along with systemic HRT).

Oestrogen improves vaginal elasticity and natural moisture. It also improves your natural protection from urine infections.

Further information

If you need further information or have any questions, please contact: Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm:

Urology Outpatients Reception: 01225 825990

Urology Nurse Specialists: 01225 824034

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Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) if you require this leaflet in a different format, or would like to feedback your experience of the hospital. Email ruh-tr.pals@nhs.net or telephone 01225 825656 / 826319.