

Sexual Dysfunction Association

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Painful sex or dyspareunia

Pain during or after sex is known as dyspareunia (**dys par eunia**). Women with dyspareunia may have pain in the vagina, clitoris or labia. It can also be classed as superficial (at the entrance of the vagina) or deep (felt on deep penetration) depending on the site of the pain. Some women may also have severe tightening of the vaginal muscles during penetration, a condition called **vaginismus**.

Superficial dyspareunia

Common causes and their treatments include the following:

- **Poor arousal and/or lubrication.** Increased clitoral stimulation before sex may help or use of lubricants which you can buy over the counter. Water based lubricants are preferred to petroleum based ones (Vaseline, baby oil) as the latter may damage ordinary latex condoms leading to a sexually transmitted disease or an unplanned pregnancy. Women who have vaginal dryness after the menopause may need oestrogen tablets, creams and pessaries which are put directly into the vagina.
- **Spermicides and/or latex condoms.** Some women find that these cause irritation or they may even be allergic to them. If this is the case they should be avoided. Non latex condoms are available.
- Infections such as **thrush** (candida) or sexually transmitted diseases. Treatment depends on the type of infection.
- **Vulvar vestibulitis** is a condition where there is pain at a specific place at the entrance of the vagina. Its cause is unknown. Avoiding soap, shampoo and other irritants may help. **Tight fitting underwear or jeans** may irritate the area and condoms lubricated with a spermicidal should be avoided. Many specific treatments for vulvar vestibulitis are used, but there is a lack of high quality research. Local anaesthetic creams may relieve pain during sex. Low dose pain medications, steroid creams, behavioural therapy and as a last resort, surgery are used. The good news is that the condition can get better on its own in up to 50% of women.
- **Vulvodynia** is a condition where pain is felt over a wider area and can extend to the anal (back passage) region or to the upper thigh. Again its cause is unknown. Avoiding soap, shampoo and other irritants may help. Pain medications and some antidepressants may help. Local anaesthetics are not generally helpful as they only provide short-term relief.
- **Skin conditions** include dermatitis and lichen sclerosis. Treatment will depend on the type of disease and steroid creams may be recommended.

Deep dyspareunia

While the pain may be due to lack of arousal it may be due to diseases in the pelvis. These include:

- **Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID).** This is caused by an infection such as thrush (chlamydia) or gonorrhoea. As well as having pain you might have a vaginal discharge or bleeding or even a temperature. Treatment depends on the type of infection.
- **Endometriosis.** This is an often painful condition in which tissue from the lining of the womb (endometrium) is also present in the pelvis outside the womb. Symptoms include cyclical or chronic pelvic pain and painful and heavy periods. Treatment depends on how bad the disease is and may involve medication or surgery.
- **Pelvic adhesions.** These can arise after surgery or radiotherapy and may require surgery.
- **Fibroids.** These are common benign muscle tumours of the womb. They can also cause heavy painful periods. Treatments include surgery.
- **Irritable bowel syndrome.** Some women with this condition may have deep dyspareunia.
- **Sexual pain depending on your position.** Sometimes deep thrusting can cause pressure on the ovary, producing pain. This should also be considered especially if tests are normal.

Finally dyspareunia may stem from a past history of sexual abuse or trauma. You may need psychosexual counselling. You can be referred for sex therapy by your GP or other health professional. Some will take self referrals. Sex therapy can be obtained through the NHS or privately. It is important to make sure that the sex therapist is qualified and abides by the codes of ethics of an appropriate professional body. Look for a therapist who is a member of the Institute of Psychosexual Medicine (<http://www.ipm.org.uk/>) or the British Association for Sexual and Relationship Therapy (<http://www.basrt.org.uk/>).

An invitation

..... to enrol as a friend of The Sexual Dysfunction Association. For a small annual subscription you will know that you are contributing to a charity that helps overcome the problems of male and female sexual dysfunction. If you are interested please telephone or write for an application form or complete our on-line registration form.

