

Vulval Hygiene

What is vulval hygiene?

Vulval hygiene refers to practices and measures taken to maintain cleanliness and health of the vulva, which is the external female genital area.

How should I wash and clean the vulval area?

Avoid using soaps, bubble baths, shower gels, body scrubs, deodorants, wet wipes, baby wipes, douches, and feminine wipes in the vulval area. Even products marketed for the feminine area may contain irritants.

Washing with water alone can dry the skin and worsen symptoms.

Instead, use a soap substitute such as Dermol or hydramol. Wash only once a day, as overcleaning can aggravate symptoms.

Should I follow different practices for bathing and showering?

Yes, when bathing, try to avoid washing your hair as you bathe. In the shower, wash your body and hair first, keeping your legs together to prevent products from reaching your vulval skin. Then rinse the vulva either by taking down the shower head or using a jug of clean, warm water.

After rinsing, use your soap substitute and rinse thoroughly. After a bath or shower, gently dab dry with a soft towel and apply an emollient.

What should I consider regarding clothing for vulval hygiene?

It is recommended to wear loose-fitting silk or cotton underwear in white or light colors, as dark textile dyes (black, navy) may cause allergies.

If you wash new, dark underwear a few times before wearing it, it will be less likely to cause a problem.

Avoid wearing tight-fitting clothes such as tights, cycling shorts, leggings, or tight jeans. It's also beneficial to sleep without underwear.

What should be avoided for vulval hygiene?

- Fabric conditioners and biological washing powders. You may want to wash your underwear separately in a non-biological washing powder or gel.
- Over the counter creams including baby or nappy creams, herbal creams such as tea tree oil and Aloe Vera and 'thrush' treatments as they may include possible irritants.
- Wearing panty liners or sanitary pads on a regular basis and certainly not perfumed ones.
- Antiseptic as a cream or added to bath water in the vulval area.
- Coloured toilet paper.
- Wearing nail varnish if you tend to scratch your skin.
- Shaving or waxing your pubic hair - trimming is better.
- Vaginal douches.
- Spermicidally lubricated condoms.
- Contraceptive creams and spermicides.
- Swimming in highly chlorinated pools unless a barrier cream is applied first.
- Hot tubs.
- Activities that put direct pressure on the vulva such as cycling and horse riding.
- Exercises that create a lot of friction in the vulval area; try lower intensity exercise eg. walking.

What should I do if I experience uncomfortable symptoms?

Symptoms of burning can be relieved by applying an ice pack or frozen gel pack wrapped in a towel to the skin. Do not apply the pack directly to the skin

If you have pain, Use a foam rubber doughnut for long periods of sitting and try to stand / walk for a few minutes every so often.

Learn some relaxation techniques to do during the day.

If you experience a lot of itching you can buy anti-histamines over the counter to help. Take a non-drowsy one during the day and a drowsy one at night. This will help you to sleep better and scratch less. You can just take these when needed.

What should I know about using emollients for vulval hygiene?

It is recommended to moisturise your vulval skin 4-5 times a day as this will protect the skin and prevent flare ups even if you do not have symptoms. Find one that suits you; if the first one you try does not work well; it is always worth trying another one.

Suitable emollients are: Balneum cream, Hydramol, Balneum plus cream, Epaderm, Diprobase, 50:50 and Aveeno.

If your skin is irritated, you can keep it in the fridge and dabbed on to cool and soothe the skin as often as you like.

In our busy lives it is easy to apply moisturiser morning and evening but less easy during the day. Try keeping your cream next to the toilet; firstly you will see it and remember to use it every time you go, secondly, you will already be half undressed and it will be easy to apply.

Barrier creams such as Epaderm or Hydramol can be applied prior to passing urine to protect your skin and prevent the urine stinging. It can be smeared on the edges of your sanitary or incontinence pad if it's easier and should be used prior to swimming.

Decant some into a smaller pot to carry in your handbag. This means you will never be without relief wherever you are. Travel pots can be bought from Boots, Superdrug and sometimes Primark very cheaply.

Continue with the soap substitutes and moisturising even when your symptoms have settled as this is what helps keep the condition under control. It is particularly important to continue after a course of steroid ointment.

Ensure that your GP has your soap substitute and emollient on a repeat prescription basis so that you can get it more easily. Most symptoms reoccur when you stop using the treatments regularly.

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