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## POST MENOPAUSE SEXUAL HEALTH

### Vulvovaginal health: Moisturize, Lubricate, Stretch (MLS)

**None of the information provided here is a substitute for care and consultation with your health care provider. Always consult with your health care provider before beginning any vulvovaginal care.**

- **What is vulvovaginal health?**
  - Every woman needs to know how to take care of the vulva and vagina. Without estrogen, the mucous membrane of the inner labia and vagina can get thin and too dry. MLS is as important as the care of every other part of a woman's body. Every woman has different preferences for accomplishing MLS. Customize! Encourage trying different products until getting the 'best fit.'
  - A woman needs to know what her vulva and the opening of her vagina look like. It is good to know the names of the different parts of the vulva. There is a diagram available at the sexual health website.
  - Educate your partner! Your partner doesn't know anymore about sexual health than you. Show your partner this handout or the sexual health website

### **Moisturize—needs to occur 2-3 times/week:**

Many women are also able to take localized estrogen in the form of a small suppository in the vagina (Vagifem), a ring placed over the opening of the cervix (Estring), or a cream applied directly to the vulva and vagina (like an estradiol cream). The doses are small and the estrogen stimulates normal lubricating activity in the vagina. Many women report that they experience positive side effects in increased urethral comfort and decreased urinary leakage with the use of this localized estrogen.

There are many women who are not able to take estrogen in any form, but some women, for instance once they are post cancer treatment for a certain length of time, are able to use this local estrogen. The localized estrogen is available by prescription and must be approved by a woman's health care provider. It is worth checking with your doctor or nurse practitioner about this.

If not using localized estrogen, consider the following for moisturizing

- Replens, KY Liquibeads. Both available through drugstores or at drugstore.com. If this is 'too much' moisture or too irritating, then
- Vitamin E suppositories, available at health stores or on web or

- Take regular Vitamin E capsules, slice them open and use oil
- Make sure it is pure Vitamin E oil
- Extra virgin olive oil can be used in replace of Replens. Use a Replens applicator, fill top portion with olive oil and insert in vagina 2-3 times aweek. Remember to check with your health care provider. If you are prone to UTIs and yeast infections or have diabetes, you may not be able to use oil.
- No other food oils should be used as these can trap bacteria

## **Lubricate:**

Vaginal lubrication is a normally occurring wetness inside of the vagina. Since the vagina and the inner labia of the vulva are mucous membranes, like the inside of the mouth, the vagina and inner labia need to have regular moisture. Just as saliva lubricates the inside of the mouth, vaginal mucus is produced in the upper walls of the vagina and bathes the vagina and inner labia is a continual film of lubrication. This process goes on from before a woman is born until she is menopausal. The process of lubrication is stimulated in part by the presence of estrogen in the body.

Lubrication not only helps during sexual activity. Lubrication protects the vulva and vagina from getting too dried up, itching, feeling painful, or experiencing tiny cracks from all the dryness. Sometimes women feel a burning sensation after urination or sexual activity as well.

### **Vaginal dryness is a normally occurring reaction to any of the following:**

- Taking antihistamine medications, like hay fever medicines. These are medicines that try to dry up your sinuses. And they can dry up other parts of your body too.
- Taking some antidepressants or other psychopharmacologic medications.
- Many treatments for illnesses, like radiation, chemotherapy, or other medications can cause dryness.
- The normal process of perimenopause and menopause can cause vaginal dryness.

Lubricants can be purchased at drugstore.com or at any drugstore. They are usually located in the same area where condoms are sold, or may be in the section for women's health with menopausal products.

- Lubricate when dilating/stretching the vagina or when engaging in sexual activity. Lubricate both the inner labia, the opening (introitus) of the vagina, and inside the vagina.
- Find glycerin free lubricants. Try Slippery Stuff (available drugstore.com, goodvibes.com)
- For entire lubricant list, go <http://redlightheidi.com/lubricants-organic-glycerin-free/>
- Lubrication reduces the burning, itching, irritation feel inside the vagina during or after penetration

## **Stretch**

The skin/membrane of the opening to the vagina and the inside of the vagina will respond to gentle stretching/dilating, several times a week

- Regular stretching makes penetration possible without pain
- Make stretching part of a routine

### **What is stretching? And why?**

Stretching is the steady pressure applied to a part of the body in order to gently exercise and keep that part of the body supple. When we get up in the morning, we often stretch our arms over our heads to gently ‘work the kinks out’ of our joints and back. It feels good to regularly stretch parts of the body. The vagina is no different.

### **Pain, muscle spasm and shrinking:**

Some women never experience pain with penetration, not at the introitus—the opening—or inside the vagina (along the walls), or near the cervix. But other women report that they experience pain only with penetration. This can occur if they are not lubricated enough. Other women report that the vagina doesn’t feel ‘big enough.’ One woman said, “I feel like there is a wall or muscle there and it won’t open up.’ This can occur after menopause or chemotherapy or radiation. Some women feel that the muscles of the pelvic floor are spasming and are too tight.

### **Stretching the inside of the vagina:**

The vagina is described as a ‘potential space’. Imagine the inside of the mouth. The cheeks are resting against teeth. But if a woman wants, she can ‘push’ her cheeks out by filling them with air. The mouth is a ‘stretchy’ space. The vagina—when all systems are working—is also a stretchy space. Even after menopause or treatment, the walls of the vagina can relearn to stretch and through regular dilating, once or twice a week, stay stretched. Even if a woman thinks she will not be engaging in any penetrative sexual activity, the vagina remains an important part of her body and in need of attention as part of her general physical health. For instance, a woman will continue to have regular gynecologic exams, may have a yeast infection and need to insert a suppository. There are many reasons to continue to make sure the vagina is comfortable with some penetration.

### **Pelvic floor muscle relaxation and dilator therapy:**

Some women practice regular dilating/stretching of the vagina so that penetration can occur without pain, spasm or tightness. A set of dilators—sometimes called inserters—are purchased. [www.vaginismus.com](http://www.vaginismus.com) is an excellent website for ordering vaginal dilators. They cost about \$45 and about \$10 for shipping. Their phone number is: 888.426.9900. Vaginal dilators/inserters are available through direct order. A companion work book is also available. These are shipped directly to the woman and arrive with a ‘nondescript’ return address on the plain brown box. A free packet of slippery stuff lubricant is included. You can also look at the dilators listed at [pureromance.com](http://pureromance.com). Slightly more expensive, but a little more ‘rubbery’ instead of hard plastic.

If cost is a problem, consider going to [www.goodvibes.com](http://www.goodvibes.com) and looking at the different vibrators or anal plugs and purchasing one that feels right to you. The customer assistance is very good at this site.

Instructions for dilating are at the University of Michigan *center for sexual health* website. Always make sure the dilators have been cleaned in hot sudsy water, rinsed, and dried. The dilator should have plenty of lubricant on it so that it slides and isn't 'dry.'

There are two important parts to dilating. First, the gradual steady insertion of the dilator. It might be uncomfortable, but it shouldn't be painful. Hold the dilator in place for about 2 minutes, pressing it gently in. Overtime, a woman will notice that she can insert more and more of the dilator's 'length' into her vagina as the vagina slowly 'relearns' to stretch. The second part of dilating involves moving the dilator in and out of the vagina. This doesn't have to be a 'vigorous, thrusting motion' as one sex therapist once called intercourse. Instead, it is a gentle in and out. This helps the vaginal walls to 'remember' to tolerate friction, causes them to lubricate a little, and over repeated dilation the walls become less sensitive and lose the 'burning' feeling.

The dilators are progressive in size. A woman starts with the thinner dilator and uses that until the dilator is completely comfortable on insertion. Then she can try using the next larger dilator, etc.

Partners sometimes worry that dilators will be preferred over sexual activity with a partner. A woman can remind her partner that this is to stretch the vagina because she wants to enjoy penetrative sex with her partner. A body that is fit is a body that can enjoy pleasure more. Vaginas are part of the body.

#### **Bearing down when the opening to the vagina feels 'too tight' or blocked:**

The term 'bearing down' refers to pushing down on the muscles in the genital region. These are the same muscles used to pass gas, bear down or push in a bowel movement. When pushing down, this motion actually allows the opening of the vagina to 'open up' a little and a finger or dilator or vibrator or penis that is being held against those 'too tight' muscles can more easily slide in when a woman is 'bearing down.'

Some women also think about the 'pushing' they did in childbirth when they want to open up those too tight muscles at the opening of the vagina.

#### **What about Kegels?**

Kegels can increase pleasurable sensation during orgasm and provide better muscle tone. Often Kegels can help to keep the muscles around the bladder firm and help prevent urinary incontinence.

#### **Stretching the opening of the vagina:**

The second type of stretching is to make sure that the vagina is comfortable being penetrated. A woman can do this exercise during her shower or bath. With wet fingers, insert one or two fingers into the vagina gently, pushing slowly up into the interior space

and then make a small circular motion with the finger, assuring that all the walls of the vagina are comfortable being touched.

Next, take the index finger or thumb and gently in a circular motion, press all the way around the opening of the vagina (called the introitus) in clocklike fashion. The woman pulls her introitus gently open as she moves her finger around the circle. If you are having trouble imaging this, imagine opening your mouth and then taking your finger and pressing gently out in a circle against your lips, as if stretching your mouth wider. Your introitus will respond to this motion by great vaginal comfort when being penetrated.

To remind herself to do the stretches, a woman can take waterproof magic marker and write the word “STRETCH” on her shampoo bottle. It takes no longer than 5-10 seconds to complete. Fast and easy and should be done every time a woman showers. No soap used as that would be too abrasive.

## **OTHER CONCERNS:**

### **Bathing the vulva and vagina:**

Douching is not necessary and washes away natural moisture. Even soap can be too harsh for many women. Gently rinsing the vulva with water may be all that is necessary.

### **Referral to physical therapy:**

Physician guidance or sex therapist guidance may be necessary in referral to a physical therapist trained in pelvic floor muscle relaxation. There are female physical therapists who are trained in pelvic floor muscle relaxation. Using biofeedback, teaching physical muscle relaxation exercises, and other techniques, a physical therapist can work with a woman to reduce painful penetration. Physical therapists trained in pelvic floor muscle relaxation can be located through the American Physical Therapy Association website (apta.org).

At University of Michigan, the physical therapists are contacted through the Physical Therapy Department.

A prescription for this therapy can be written as: evaluate and treat pelvic floor muscle spasm. If a person’s insurance covers physical therapy, it usually covers pelvic floor muscle relaxation physical therapy.

This is a highly effective form of treatment for vaginal pain with penetration.

-----**website for further women’s sexual health questions:**

<http://www.sexualityresources.com/>

## **FINAL CAUTIONARY NOTE**

**It is important to check with your health care provider before proceeding with the information suggested here. None of the information provided here is a substitute for care and consultation with your health care provider.**