



NEWSLETTER

healthline



ADVERTISEMENT

REVIEWED**By Chris at 9:37 am, May 16, 2019**

Postmenopausal Atrophic Vaginitis

[Symptoms](#) [Causes](#) [Risk factors](#) [Complications](#) [Diagnosis](#)
[Treatment](#) [Prevention](#)



Medically reviewed by
[Debra Sullivan, PhD, MSN, RN, CNE, COI](#) on June 22, 2017
— Written
by Sandy Calhoun Rice

ADVERTISEMENT



Healthline and our partners may receive a portion of revenues if you make a purchase using a link on this page.



Overview



Postmenopausal atrophic vaginitis, or vaginal atrophy, is the thinning of the walls of the vagina caused by decreased estrogen levels. This most commonly occurs after menopause.

Menopause is the time in a woman's life, usually between ages 45 and 55, when her ovaries no longer release eggs. She also stops having menstrual periods. A woman is postmenopausal when she has not had a period for 12 months or longer.

Women with vaginal atrophy have a greater chance of chronic vaginal infections and urinary function problems. It can also make sexual intercourse painful.

According to the American Association of Family Physicians, up to 40 percent of postmenopausal women have symptoms of atrophic vaginitis.

Symptoms of vaginal atrophy

While vaginal atrophy is common, only 20 to 25 percent of symptomatic women seek medical attention from their doctor.

In some women, symptoms occur during **perimenopause**, or the years leading up to 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

related stories

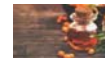


Ways to Reverse Vaginal Atrophy

- NEWSLETTER
- lack of vaginal moisture ([vaginal dryness](#))
 - [vaginal burning](#) (inflammation)

healthline

- spotting after intercourse
- discomfort or [pain during intercourse](#)
- [pain](#) or burning with urination
- more frequent [urinary tract infections](#)
- [urinary incontinence](#) (involuntary leakage)



Natural Treatments for Vaginal Atrophy



Managing the Symptoms of Menopause



Vaginal Dryness Alternative Treatments



What You Need to Know About Vaginal Health at Every Age

ADVERTISEMENT

Causes of vaginal atrophy

The cause of atrophic vaginitis is a decline in estrogen. Without estrogen, vaginal tissue thins and dries out. It becomes less elastic, more fragile, and more easily injured.

A decline in estrogen can occur at other times besides menopause, including:

- during breastfeeding
- after removal of ovaries (surgical menopause)
- after [chemotherapy](#) for treatment of cancer
- after pelvic radiation therapy for treatment of cancer
- after [hormonal therapy](#) for treatment of breast cancer



Regular sexual activity helps keep vaginal tissues healthy. A [healthy sex life](#) also benefits the circulatory system and improves heart health.

Risk factors for vaginal atrophy

Some women are more likely than others to get atrophic vaginitis. Women who have never given birth vaginally are more prone to vaginal atrophy than women who delivered their babies vaginally.

[Smoking](#) impairs blood circulation, depriving the vagina and other tissues of oxygen. Tissue thinning occurs where blood flow is decreased or restricted. Smokers are also less responsive to estrogen therapy in pill form.

ADVERTISING

10 Exercises to Tone Every Inch of Your Body →

Potential complications

Atrophic vaginitis increases a woman's risk of contracting vaginal infections. Atrophy causes changes in the acidic environment of the vagina, making it easier for bacteria, yeast, and other organisms to thrive.

It also increases the risk of urinary system atrophy (genitourinary atrophy). Symptoms associated with atrophy-related urinary tract problems include more frequent or more urgent urination or a burning sensation during urination.

Some women may also have [incontinence](#) and get more [urinary tract infections](#).

Diagnosing vaginal atrophy

See your doctor right away if sexual intercourse is painful, even with lubrication. You should also see your doctor if you experience unusual vaginal bleeding, discharge, burning, or soreness.

Some women are embarrassed to talk to their doctor about this intimate problem. If you're experiencing these symptoms, it's important to seek the advice of a doctor to help avoid the potential complications mentioned above.

Your doctor will ask you questions about your health history. They'll want to know how long ago you stopped having periods and whether you have ever had cancer. The doctor may ask what, if any, commercial or over-the-counter products you use. Some perfumes, soaps, bath products, deodorants, lubricants, and spermicides can aggravate the sensitive sexual organs.



Your doctor may refer you to a gynecologist for tests and a physical examination. During a pelvic exam, they will palpate, or feel, your pelvic organs. The doctor will also examine your external genitalia for physical signs of atrophy, such as:

- pale, smooth, shiny vaginal lining
- loss of elasticity
- sparse pubic hair
- smooth, thin external genitalia
- stretching of uterine support tissue
- pelvic organ prolapse (bulges in the walls of the vagina)

The doctor might order the following tests:

- [pelvic examination](#)
- vaginal smear test
- vaginal acidity test
- blood test
- [urine test](#)

The smear test is a microscopic examination of tissue that has been scraped from the vaginal walls. It looks for certain types of cells and bacteria that are more prevalent with vaginal atrophy.

To test acidity, a paper indicator strip is inserted into the vagina. Your doctor can also collect vaginal secretions for this test.

You may also be asked to provide samples of blood and urine for laboratory testing and analysis. These tests check several factors, including your estrogen levels.



Advertisement



How Collagen Can Boost Your Body's Skin, Muscle, and Gut



Treatment of vaginal atrophy

NEWSLETTER

healthline



With treatment, it's possible to improve your vaginal health and your quality of life. Treatment can focus on symptoms or the underlying cause.

[Over-the-counter moisturizers](#) or [water-based lubricants](#) can help treat dryness.

If symptoms are severe, your doctor may recommend [estrogen replacement therapy](#). Estrogen improves vaginal elasticity and natural moisture. It usually works in just a few weeks. Estrogen can be taken either topically or orally.

Topical estrogen

Taking estrogen through the skin limits how much estrogen gets into the bloodstream. Topical estrogens don't treat any systemic symptoms of menopause, such as [hot flashes](#). These types of estrogen treatments have not been shown to increase the risk of [endometrial cancer](#). However, call your doctor right away if you're using topical estrogen and experience unusual vaginal bleeding.

Topical estrogen is available in several forms:

- A vaginal estrogen ring, such as Estring. Estring is a flexible, soft ring inserted into the upper part of the vagina by you or your doctor. It releases a constant dose of estrogen and only needs to be replaced every three months. Estrogen rings are higher-dose estrogen preparations and may increase a woman's risk for endometrial cancer. You should speak with your physician about your risk and possible need for progestin as well.
- A vaginal estrogen cream, such as Premarin or Estrace. These types of medications are inserted into the vagina with an applicator at bedtime. Your doctor may prescribe the cream daily for a couple of weeks, then step down to two or three times per week.
- A vaginal estrogen tablet, such as Vagifem, is inserted into the vagina using a disposable applicator. Usually, one dose per day is prescribed at first, which is later stepped down to one or two times per week.



[Learn more: Hormone therapy drugs: Estradiol vs. Premarin »](#)

Oral estrogen

During menopause, oral estrogen is often used to treat hot flashes and vaginal dryness. But prolonged use heightens the risk of certain cancers. Oral estrogen usually isn't prescribed to people who have had cancer.

If your health history doesn't include cancer, progesterone may be prescribed in addition to estrogen in pill or patch form. Your doctor will work with you to decide which option is best for you.

Women taking progesterone and estrogen may have some bleeding after menopause. While the cancer risk for women taking both progesterone and estrogen is minimal, you should still see your doctor to have any episodes of postmenopausal bleeding evaluated. This can be an early sign of endometrial cancer.

Prevention and lifestyle

In addition to taking medication, you can make certain lifestyle changes as well.

ADVERTISEMENT



Advertisement



For a Longer Life and Happier Gut, Eat More Fiber →

Was this article helpful?

Yes

No

Wearing [cotton underwear](#) and loose-fitting clothing can improve symptoms. Loose cotton clothing improves air circulation around the genitals, making them a less ideal environment for bacteria to grow.

A woman with atrophic vaginitis can experience pain during sexual intercourse. However, staying sexually active enhances blood circulation in the vagina and stimulates natural moisture. Sexual activity has no effect on estrogen levels. But by improving blood circulation, it keeps your sexual organs healthier for longer. Allowing time to become sexually aroused can make sexual intercourse more comfortable.

[Vitamin E oil](#) can also be used as a lubricant. There's also some evidence that [vitamin D](#) increases moisture in the vagina. Vitamin D also helps the body absorb calcium. This helps to slow or prevent postmenopausal bone loss, especially when combined with regular exercise.

[Read more: Natural treatments for vaginal atrophy »](#)

Are you dealing with hot flashes?

You're not alone — more than 75 percent of women have hot flashes at some point in their lives. Rory can help, with a free online consultation and nonhormonal treatment options.

FIND TREATMENTS



+ 5 sources



FEEDBACK: 😞 😊



ADVERTISEMENT



Ways to Reverse Vaginal Atrophy



Medically reviewed by Michael Weber, MD

If you have vaginal atrophy, you may wonder if it can be reversed. With treatment, some women find that their symptoms improve.

[READ MORE →](#)

Natural Treatments for Vaginal Atrophy



Medically reviewed by University of Illinois

Do you have vaginal dryness or other urinary symptoms that won't go away? You may have vaginal atrophy. Learn about natural treatments for it.

[READ MORE →](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Managing the Symptoms of Menopause



Medically reviewed by Debra Rose Wilson, PhD, MSN, RN, IBCLC, AHN-BC, CHT

We take a close look at the most common menopause symptoms and explain how to effectively deal with them.

[READ MORE →](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

6 Ways to Boost Your Coffee with Vitamins and Antioxidants →

Vaginal Dryness Alternative Treatments



Medically reviewed by Debra Rose Wilson, PhD, MSN, RN, IBCLC, AHN-BC, CHT

Vaginal dryness is an uncomfortable and often painful condition that occurs naturally during and after menopause. Take a look at what causes vaginal...

[READ MORE →](#)

ADVERTISEMENT





NEWSLETTER

What You Need to Know About Vaginal Health at Every Age

Medically

reviewed by Patricia Geraghty, RN, FNP, MSN

Aging can be a touchy subject for women, but knowing what's going on "down there" is important as your body matures. Here's a guide for vaginal health...

[READ MORE →](#)

What Causes Vaginal Dryness?

A thin layer of moisture coats the walls of a woman's vagina. This moisture provides an alkaline environment that sperm can survive in and travel in...

[READ MORE →](#)

Pelvic Exam



Medically reviewed by Debra Rose Wilson,
PhD, MSN, RN, IBCLC, AHN-BC, CHT

A pelvic exam is a visual and physical examination of a woman's reproductive organs.

[READ MORE →](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Sexual Side Effects of Menopause



Medically reviewed by Holly Ernst, PA-C

From vaginal dryness to painful sex and dyspareunia, there are common side effects that most women deal with during menopause. Get more information...

[READ MORE →](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

ADVERTISEMENT

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT): Is It Right for You?



NEWSLETTER

Medically

reviewed by Alan Carter, PharmD



Hormone replacement therapy can make a major difference in counteracting menopause symptoms by replacing diminished hormones naturally. Here's a...

[READ MORE →](#)

Menopause Diet

Medically reviewed by Natalie Butler, RD,
LD

Maintaining a healthy diet can help reduce the symptoms of menopause. Read more about which foods are beneficial and which aren't.

[READ MORE →](#)



NEWSLETTER



healthline



Get our wellness newsletter

Fitness and nutrition tips, health news, and more.

Enter your email

SUBSCRIBE

Your [privacy](#) is important to us

Find
Terms
Privacy
Advertising
Newsletters
Help
Use
Doctor

Copyright © 2005 - 2019 Healthline Media. All rights reserved. Our content does not constitute a medical consultation. See a certified medical professional for diagnosis. Policy.

