

# Pain During Intercourse

**W**hen a woman feels pain while having sexual intercourse, it is called dyspareunia. Painful sex is fairly common. Nearly 2 out of 3 women have it at some time during their lives. The pain can range from very mild to severe.

*This pamphlet will explain:*

- *Changes in your body during sex*
- *Where pain can occur during sex*
- *What causes dyspareunia*
- *How it is treated*



---

Pain during sex is a sign there may be a problem. Proper treatment can help you enjoy your sex life.





## Your Reproductive Organs

To understand the causes of painful sex, it helps to know about the female body. The vagina is a passage that leads from the **uterus** to the outside of the body. The cervix is the lower, narrow end of the uterus. It protrudes into the vagina. The outside of the female genital area is called the vulva. At the opening of the vagina are the inner and outer labia (or lips). The clitoris is at top of the inner lips. For most women, the clitoris is a center of sexual pleasure. The perineum is the area between the anus and vagina.

## Why You May Feel Pain

Painful sex can have both physical and emotional causes. To understand why the pain occurs, you should know what happens to your body during sex.

A woman's body follows a regular pattern when she has sex. There are four stages:

1. Desire—The feeling that you want to have sex.
2. Arousal—Physical changes take place. Your vagina and vulva get moist and the muscles of the opening of the vagina relax. The clitoris swells

and enlarges. The uterus lifts up, and the vagina gets deeper and wider.

3. Orgasm—The peak of the response. The muscles of the vagina and uterus contract and create a strong feeling of pleasure. The clitoris can feel orgasm, too.
4. Resolution—The vagina, clitoris, and uterus return to their normal state.

The arousal stage is important because this is when your vagina prepares itself for your partner to enter you. If any part of this natural pattern does not happen, you may feel discomfort or pain with sex.

## Types of Pain and What You Can Do

During sex a woman may feel pain in the vulva, at the opening of the vagina, within the vagina, or deep inside. Vulvar pain is pain felt on the surface (outside) of the vagina. Vaginal pain is felt within the vagina. Deep pain can occur in the lower back, pelvic region, uterus, and bladder.

Different types of pain have different causes. It's important to find the cause because you may have problems that need medication, surgery, or counseling.

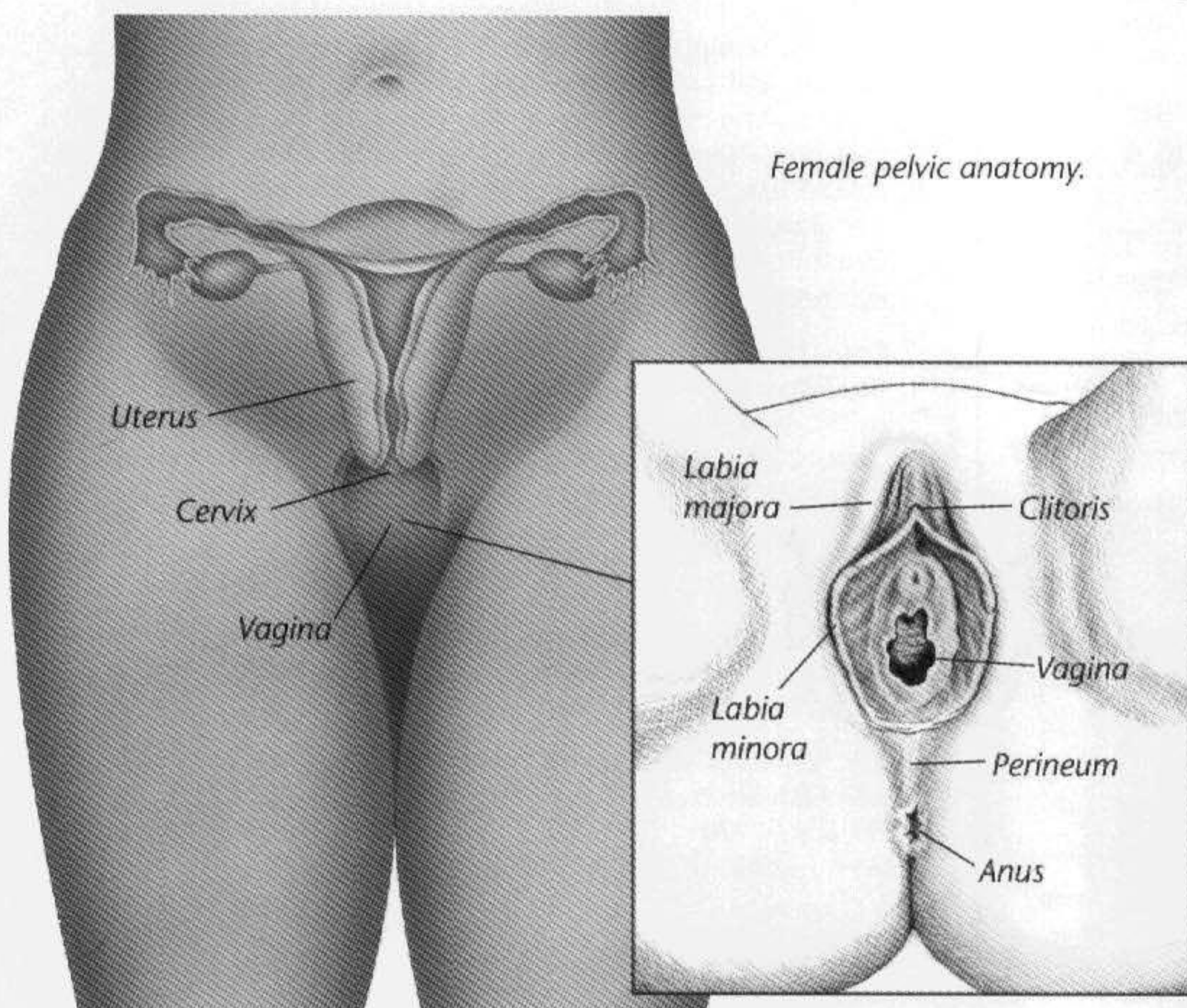
### Vulvar Pain

Pain can occur when some part of the vulva is touched. The vulva may be tender or irritated from using soaps or over-the-counter vaginal sprays or douches. Other causes include scars, cysts, or infections.

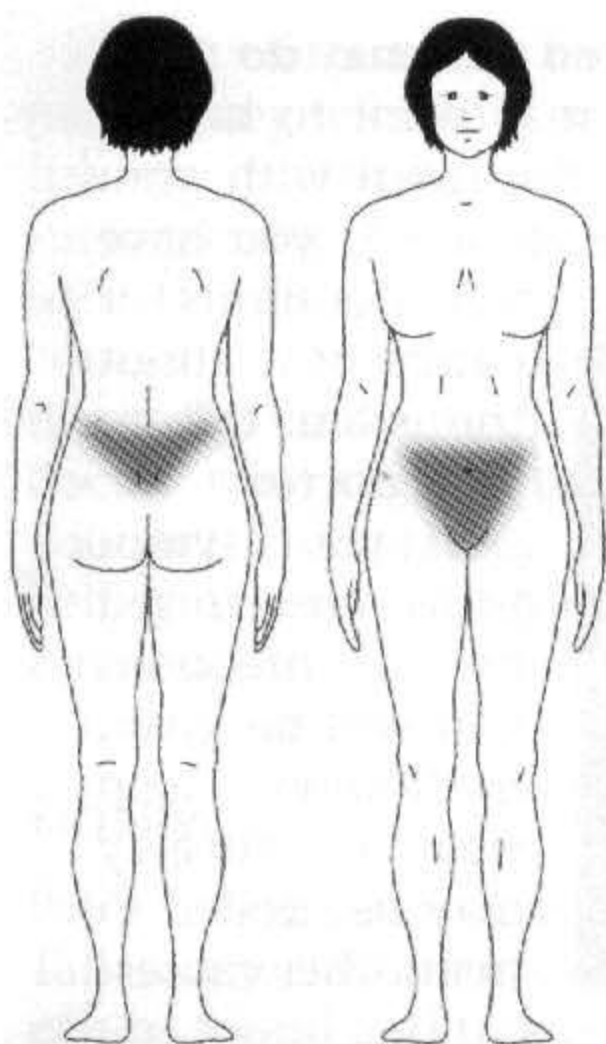
### Vaginal Pain

**Vaginal dryness.** The most common cause of pain inside the vagina is lack of moisture. This can occur with certain medications, with certain medical conditions, or because you are not aroused. It can occur at certain times of your life such as during or just after pregnancy, while breastfeeding, or near or after **menopause**.

Around menopause, **estrogen** levels become lower. As a result, vaginal tissue may get thinner and drier. This may cause discomfort during sex. Some menopausal women take estrogen therapy to relieve the dryness. You also can buy water-soluble







*During sex, a woman may feel pain in the vulva, vagina, lower back, pelvic region, uterus, and bladder (shaded areas).*

lubricants that help moisten the vagina.

Vaginal dryness can occur when you are not aroused enough during sex. You should discuss with your partner what makes you feel aroused. Often it is helpful for a couple to use a cream, jelly, or vaginal suppository to provide vaginal lubrication needed for sex. However, never use any kind of oil—such as petroleum jelly or baby or mineral oil—with latex condoms. These substances can dissolve the latex and cause the condom to break. Water-based cream or jelly is safe for use with condoms.

**Vaginitis.** Another cause of vaginal pain is vaginitis—an inflammation of the vagina. The most common symptoms of vaginitis are discharge, itching, and burning of the vagina and vulva. Vaginitis has many possible causes, such as yeast or bacterial infection. Vaginitis can be treated with medication that you take by mouth or place in the vagina.

**Vaginismus.** Vaginismus is a spasm of the muscles at the opening of the vagina. It causes pain when your partner tries to enter the vagina. In some cases, vaginismus is present the first time a woman has—or tries to have—sex. The pain also may occur during a pelvic exam.

Vaginismus can have many medical causes. These include:

- Scars in the vagina from injury, childbirth, or surgery
- Irritation from douches, spermicides, or the latex in condoms
- Infections of the vulva or vagina

Vaginismus also can be a response to a fear of some kind, such as being afraid of getting pregnant. It is sometimes caused by past pain or trauma, like from rape or sexual abuse. In most cases, this condition can be treated with success.



The doctor will examine you and may do some tests. During the exam, you may want to have a friend or family member in the room with you. This may help you feel more at ease. If you have



any questions or concerns about the exam, talk to your doctor.

If your symptoms are caused by an infection, you will be given medication to help treat it. Surgery may be needed to treat other causes.

### Deep Pain

Pain that starts deep inside may be a warning sign of an internal problem. Pain that happens when the penis touches the cervix can have many causes:

- **Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)**
- Problems with the uterus
- **Endometriosis**
- A pelvic mass
- Bowel or bladder disease
- Scar tissue (adhesions)
- Ovarian cysts

A pelvic exam often gives clues about the causes of deep pain. Your doctor may suggest **laparoscopy** to look into your abdomen and at the reproductive organs. Laparoscopy also can be used to treat some of these problems.

### How Emotions Play a Role

Pain during sex sometimes can be linked to a state of mind. Emotional factors, like memories or fears, can keep you from relaxing. Some women may feel guilty having sex. Or, some women may be afraid of getting pregnant or getting a **sexually transmitted disease (STD)**. Sometimes, a past bad sexual experience, such as rape or sexual abuse, may be the cause. All these factors may make it hard to relax during sex. This prevents arousal and lubrication.

Some women may feel pain during sex if they are having problems with their partner. It's a good idea to talk about your concerns with your partner and your doctor. Your doctor may suggest that you see a counselor to help you cope with your problems.



### Finally...

Pain during sex is a sign there may be a problem. Talk to your doctor about the pain so that the cause can be found and treated as soon as possible. Proper treatment can help you enjoy your sex life.

### Glossary

**Endometriosis:** A condition in which tissue similar to that normally lining the uterus is found outside of the uterus, usually on the ovaries, fallopian tubes, and other pelvic structures.

**Estrogen:** A female hormone produced in the ovaries that stimulates the growth of the lining of the uterus.

**Laparoscopy:** A surgical procedure in which a slender, light-transmitting instrument, the laparoscope, is used to view the pelvic organs or perform surgery.

**Menopause:** The process in a woman's life when ovaries stop functioning and menstruation stops.

**Pelvic Inflammatory Disease:** An infection of the uterus, fallopian tubes, and nearby pelvic structures.

**Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD):** A disease spread by sexual contact, including Chlamydial infection, gonorrhea, genital warts, herpes, syphilis and infection with HIV viruses.

**Uterus:** A muscular organ in the female pelvis that contains and nourishes the developing fetus during pregnancy.