

# The vulva

Irritation, diagnosis & treatment



Jean  Hailes  
FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH

# About Jean Hailes

Founded in 1992 in honour of an extraordinary medical practitioner, Dr Jean Hailes, Jean Hailes for Women's Health reflects the enduring legacy that Jean made to women's health. She had a far-sighted vision to improve the quality of women's lives and give them practical information based on the best available evidence. She is credited with being the pioneer of menopause management in Australia.

Today, Jean Hailes is Australia's leading and most trusted women's health organisation, combining clinical care, evidence-based research and practical education for women and health professionals. We aim to translate the latest scientific and medical evidence in order to inspire positive change in women by improving their physical health and wellbeing.

Jean Hailes for Women's Health gratefully acknowledges the support of the Australian Government.



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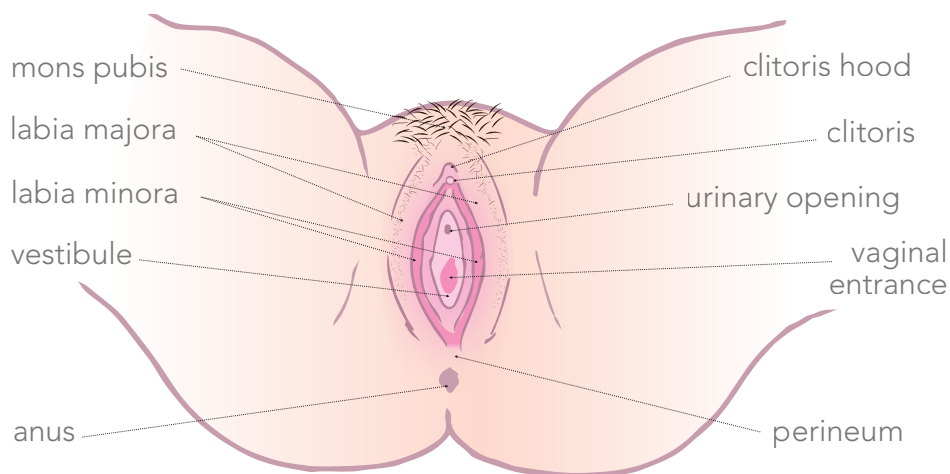


# What is the vulva?

Vulva is the general name given to all the external parts of the female genitals.

**The vulva includes the following parts of the external genitalia:**

- mons pubis (the pad of fatty tissue covered with pubic hair)
- labia majora (the outer lips, which are covered with pubic hair)
- labia minora (the inner lips, which are hairless)
- clitoris and its hood or covering (located at the front of the genital area)
- vestibule (immediately surrounds the vaginal opening and the urethral opening)
- urethral opening (through which urine leaves your body)
- introitus (vaginal entrance)
- perineum (the area of skin between the vagina and the anus).



# What is normal?

Each woman's vulva is unique in size and appearance, with no two looking the same. It is normal for there to be noticeable differences between the left and right side of the vulva, especially the labia minora. Images seen online are often heavily edited, making the vulva look symmetrical and childlike.

Because it is difficult for women to see their own vulva, many women do not know what it looks like. If you don't know what your vulva looks like, use a mirror to have a look. Once you are familiar with what your vulva looks like, it will be easier to detect any changes in the skin such as colour or texture.



The Labia Library is a great online resource, with numerous realistic pictures of labia.  
[labialibrary.org.au](http://labialibrary.org.au)

# What is vulval irritation?

Any itching, burning or discomfort of the vulva can be described as vulval irritation.

The skin of the vulva is extremely delicate, making it susceptible to a wide range of conditions. Irritation of the vulva is relatively common in women of all ages, with skin conditions and infections often being the cause.

A small part of the vulva or sometimes the entire vulva can be affected.

## Signs and symptoms include:

- redness and/or swelling
- burning and/or itching
- skin cracking or splitting (fissuring)
- whitening of skin
- associated vaginal inflammation and/or discharge.



Most cases improve with treatment, but there are a few rare conditions that can become serious if left untreated. Prompt investigation and treatment of vulval irritation is important. If left unaddressed, irritation can become a source of discomfort and worry.

# Causes of vulval irritation

Vulval irritation may be caused by any of the following:

- sweating and/or vaginal secretions
- fungal, bacterial or viral infections such as:
  - **candidiasis/thrush** – a fungal infection of the vulva and vagina. Symptoms include itching, redness, swelling and a cottage cheese-like vaginal discharge
  - **trichomonas/‘trich’** – a sexually transmitted infection. Itchiness and a smelly, green, frothy discharge are common symptoms and sex may be painful
  - **genital herpes** – a virus spread by skin-to-skin contact that can be transmitted by vaginal, oral or anal sex. The first episode is usually the worst and symptoms may include painful ulcers, blisters, a rash, flu-like symptoms, vaginal discharge and trouble passing urine. Recurrences are usually less severe and tend to occur in the same area. Areas affected may include the vulva, inner thighs, buttocks and the tissue around the anus. Genital herpes may not always cause symptoms and may go unnoticed
- **dermatitis/eczema** – common skin disorders that affect the vulva. Scratching to relieve itching may lead to further skin damage
- **allergies/adverse reactions to substances such as:**
  - perspiration and other bodily fluids
  - soaps, bath and hair products
  - laundry detergent
  - perfumed products such as ‘feminine hygiene’ sprays
  - sanitary pads and tampons
  - tight and/or synthetic clothing, hosiery, G-strings
  - chlorine or sand on swimwear that is left on wet
  - hair removal and related products
  - condoms, spermicides and lubricants



- nail polish and/or fake nails, hand creams
- scented or coloured toilet paper or wipes
- douches (vaginal irrigation is never advised)
- **some medications and local anaesthetic**
- **piercings** – these may cause infections or localised reactions
- **ingrown hairs** – common after hair removal. Gentle exfoliation may help prevent these
- **bartholin glands cyst** – these glands are located either side of the vaginal opening, in the labia minora, and produce lubricating fluid. A gland may become blocked, causing a cyst or abscess to develop, resulting in discomfort
- **varicose veins** – can develop in the vulva, particularly during pregnancy. They usually improve after childbirth, but if not, they can be treated
- **lichen sclerosus** – a skin condition that can cause itching. Skin may become thin, white, wrinkled and cracked. It is often misdiagnosed as thrush. If untreated, lichen sclerosus can lead to scarring and, in a small number of cases, cancer of the vulva
- **psoriasis** – an inflammatory condition that can affect vulval skin, causing reddened patches. Scratching may lead to further damage
- **lichen planus** – a skin condition that can affect the vulva, vagina and other body parts. Symptoms include pain, burning, itching, rawness, redness and changes to vaginal discharge. White, lacy or fern-like streaks can be seen on the vulva and there may also be erosions and ulcerations. Over time, scarring may lead to structural changes of the vagina and vulva. Rarely, cancer can occur.



# Diagnosis and treatment

## Treatment options

There are many treatment options depending on the cause of the vulval irritation. These include local treatments (corticosteroid cream, barrier ointment, gel, vaginal cream and tablets) and oral treatments. At times both may be used.

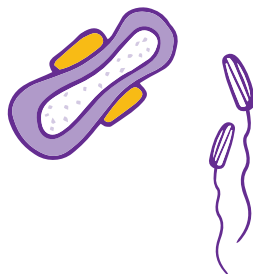
If you follow the recommended treatments and your symptoms do not improve, see your doctor again. They may refer you to a gynaecologist, a dermatologist or a women's health specialist. Some larger hospitals have specialist vulval clinics.



# Looking after your vulva

The following may help or prevent vulval irritation:

- Don't use any soap or perfumed bath products to wash your vulva – only use water or soap substitute
- Never use talcum powder on your vulva
- Avoid swimming in chlorinated water if you can
- After swimming, change out of swimwear immediately, shower to remove chlorine or salt and avoid wet clothing
- Wear cotton underpants rather than synthetic
- Wash underwear in pure, unscented soap and rinse them well
- Wear loose-fitting pants, avoid G-strings, pantyhose and tight jeans
- When urinating, lean forward to avoid a burning sensation
- After urination and/or bowel movements, always wipe or pat from front to back, using white unscented toilet paper
- It may help to bathe with a salt wash (see page 9) after you have been to the toilet or had sex
- Use 100% cotton sanitary pads and tampons. Menstrual blood may irritate your vulva, so consider using tampons
- Avoid using commercial lubricants with intercourse; natural oils such as olive or almond oil may be more suitable.



### The following may soothe vulval irritation:

- Using a cold compress on your vulva may ease itching and pain
- Don't apply ice or anything frozen directly to your skin; cover it with material such as a hand towel
- Bathe the vulva in a bicarbonate of soda or salt bath to soothe irritation and reduce itching
  - **For a tub or basin of water, add:**
    - two tablespoons of bicarbonate of soda or
    - a ¼ teaspoon of salt per litre
  - **For a bath of water, add:**
    - one cup of bicarbonate of soda or
    - a handful of salt
  - sit with the water covering your vulva for 5-10 minutes
  - pat dry, then apply cream/ointment if prescribed
  - repeat once or twice a day.



As another option, you can put a teaspoon of salt into a spray bottle of water (600ml). Spray this mix on your vulva while sitting on the toilet. You can do this while urinating to reduce stinging.

If your vulva is irritated and these suggestions have not helped, don't attempt to diagnose or treat the problem yourself. It's important to see your doctor to determine the cause.

During your appointment, your doctor will take your medical history and should examine your vulva. If the doctor does not check your vulva, it is appropriate to ask for an examination. It might be necessary to have a blood test, urine test, vulval or vaginal swab, or a vulval biopsy.

## Things to consider

There are many unproven 'home remedies' for treating vaginal infections. Not all vulval irritation is due to infection, so care should be taken to avoid self-treating. Always seek advice from your health practitioner.

### What's fact and what's fiction?

- Yoghurt and cultured milk products contain good bacteria for your digestive system. While it may improve the numbers of good bacteria in the gut and vagina, and therefore help to minimise the risk of infection, there is no evidence that eating or applying yoghurt will treat the infection
- Tea tree oil is anti-fungal and anti-bacterial. There are no clinical trials that show it is effective in treating vaginal infections. Very importantly, tea tree oil can be very irritating and can also cause contact dermatitis, so should be avoided in vulval irritation
- Garlic is anti-fungal, but the only research on garlic and vaginal infections has shown that it is not effective. Do not insert raw garlic in the vagina – it may cause more pain and irritation
- Avoid using any over-the-counter herbal vaginal washes for vulval irritation, especially without a diagnosis of what is causing the irritation.



## Probiotics

The vagina contains many different micro-organisms (tiny living organisms, including bacteria and fungi that are invisible to the naked eye) and this is referred to as the vaginal flora. A healthy vagina is rich in 'good' bacteria, mainly *Lactobacilli* that help to keep the populations of the 'bad' micro-organisms in check. An overgrowth of these 'bad' bugs may be associated with vaginal infections, such as vaginal candidiasis (thrush), or bacterial infections such as bacterial vaginosis (BV).

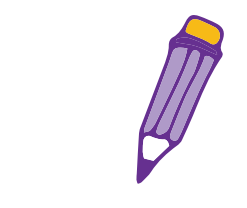
The balance of the vaginal flora may be safely restored by taking these strains of probiotics:

- *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* Lcr 35
- *Lactobacillus reuteri* RC-14 (also known as *Lactobacillus fermentum* RC-14)
- *Lactobacillus rhamnosus* GR-1.

Probiotics can also be taken alongside pharmaceutical treatment for vaginal infections. It's important to note that not all vulval irritation is due to an imbalance of vaginal bacteria.

Remember, if you have persistent symptoms, seek help from a qualified health professional.





## Notes

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# Jean Hailes for Women's Health

Jean Hailes for Women's Health provides high-quality, trusted information, to assist you to make decisions about your health. We use the latest research to develop our website and resources on a range of topics, including:

- bladder and bowel
- bone health
- breast health
- cardiovascular health
- endometriosis
- fertility and pregnancy
- health checks
- healthy living
- Indigenous health
- menopause
- mental and emotional health
- natural therapies and supplements
- polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)
- periods
- sex and sexual health
- vulva, vagina, ovaries and uterus.

## Visit [jeanhailes.org.au](http://jeanhailes.org.au) to:

- Subscribe to our free magazine and email updates
- Enjoy videos, podcasts and recipes
- Be inspired to improve your health.



### **For further information contact**

Translation, Education & Communication Unit

Jean Hailes for Women's Health  
PO Box 33314, Domain LPO  
Melbourne VIC 3004

**Toll free** 1800 JEAN HAILES (532 642)

**Email** [education@jeanhailes.org.au](mailto:education@jeanhailes.org.au)

**Website** [jeanhailes.org.au](http://jeanhailes.org.au)

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