



Patient education: Atrophic vaginitis (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is atrophic vaginitis?

Atrophic vaginitis is a condition that causes the vagina and tissues near the vagina to get dry, thin, and inflamed. This can be uncomfortable or make sex painful. Atrophic vaginitis is sometimes called "vaginal atrophy."

Atrophic vaginitis happens when a woman does not make enough of a hormone called estrogen. This condition mainly affects women who have been through menopause (meaning they have stopped having a monthly period). It can also happen to women whose ovaries were removed, who are taking certain medicines, or who are nursing.

What are the symptoms of atrophic vaginitis?

The symptoms include:

- Vaginal dryness
- Vaginal burning or irritation
- Making less lubrication during sex
- Pain during sex
- Bleeding when something touches or rubs the vagina, for example, after sex. (If you have this symptom, be sure to see a doctor.)
- Vaginal discharge (leaking fluid from the vagina)
- Urinary problems, such as having to urinate often, having pain with urination, or leaking urine. (If you have these symptoms, be sure to see a doctor.)

Some women never tell their doctor they are having symptoms of atrophic vaginitis. Often they are embarrassed or think the symptoms are a normal part of aging. If you have symptoms of this condition, and they bother you, mention it to your doctor or nurse. There are treatments that can help.

Is there a test for atrophic vaginitis?

No. There is no test. But your doctor or nurse should be able to tell if you have it by learning about your symptoms and doing an exam.

Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better?

Yes. Some women feel better if they use lubricants before sex and use a vaginal moisturizer, such as Replens or K-Y SILK-E, several times a week. Vaginal moisturizers are not the same as lubricants. They help keep the vagina moist all the time, not just during sex.

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

See your doctor or nurse if you have symptoms of atrophic vaginitis and they bother you.

How is atrophic vaginitis treated?

The most effective treatment for atrophic vaginitis is the hormone estrogen. When using estrogen to treat atrophic vaginitis, doctors recommend "vaginal estrogen." Vaginal estrogen is any form of estrogen that goes directly into the vagina. It comes in creams, tablets, or a flexible ring. Vaginal estrogen comes in small doses that don't increase the levels of estrogen in other parts of the body very much.

Estrogen also comes in higher doses in a pill, a skin patch, or a different vaginal ring. These are sometimes called "hormone replacement therapy," and need to be taken with [progesterone](#). But vaginal estrogen is better for treating symptoms of atrophic vaginitis.

If you want to take estrogen, ask your doctor or nurse what the possible risks and benefits are for you. If you have had breast or uterine cancer, or if you are at risk for these cancers, ask whether hormones are safe for you.

Besides estrogen, there are also 2 other medicines that can treat atrophic vaginitis:

- [Ospemifene](#) (brand name: Osphena) is similar to estrogen, but is not estrogen. It comes as a pill you take once a day. It can cause hot flashes.
- Prasterone, also called dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), is a medicine that you put into your vagina once a day. It comes as a "suppository," which is similar to a tablet or pill but goes directly into the vagina.

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