



Pain During Intercourse

Pain that occurs during sexual intercourse is called *dyspareunia*. It is fairly common. The symptoms range from very mild and occasional discomfort to severe pain that makes intercourse impossible. The pain can come from a number of causes. This handout explains some of the reasons for painful intercourse and what can be done about it.

Pain At The Opening Of The Vagina

Perhaps the most common cause of pain at the opening of the vagina is vaginal infection or vaginitis. Yeast, Trichomonas, bacteria, and some viruses are the most common causes. Symptoms may include soreness with intercourse, odor and discharge. A woman who has vaginitis may produce less vaginal lubrication during sex. If vaginitis does not go away or keeps coming back, fear of pain can be a contributing factor. Most vaginal infections can be treated with medications.

Infection of the bladder or the urethra (the short, narrow tube that carries urine from the bladder to the outside of the body) may also cause pain. It usually can be treated with medications also.

Pain that is felt just at the very opening of the vagina may be due to an inflammation called *vulvovestibulitis*. It can be detected only by a careful exam. Its cause is not well understood. In some cases, the problem goes away by itself over a period of months. If treatment is needed, it may include drugs to reduce the inflammation or pain. Or, surgery may sometimes be needed.

A common cause of vaginal pain is the tightening of the muscles at the opening of the vagina called *vaginismus*. The pain may occur at the start of sex or during it. Sometimes it is bad enough to prevent vaginal entry at all. It can happen after repeated bouts of vaginitis, after painful intercourse without enough sexual arousal and lubrication, or as an emotional reaction to a traumatic event. Treatment of this problem often begins with relaxation exercises to help a woman regain control over the vaginal muscles. Depending on the cause, counseling may also help.

Pain Within The Vagina

The most common cause of pain within the vagina is vaginitis caused by yeast. Pain can also occur with herpes and other viral infections. Treatment of the infection often solves the problem. Rarely, scar tissue from surgery or delivering a baby can cause pain. When this happens, a woman can often be taught to gently stretch the scarred area with vaginal dilators. In rare cases, surgery may be needed.

Another possible cause of pain within the vagina is not enough lubrication. Normally, sexual excitement causes the vagina to secrete a lubricating fluid. But a woman may not produce enough of this fluid if she:

- *is going through menopause (too little or no fluid may be produced because of a decrease in estrogen)
- *Has just had a baby
- *Is breastfeeding
- *Takes certain prescription drugs
- *Is tense, angry, or frightened

Often it is helpful for a couple to use a cream, jelly, or vaginal suppository to provide lubrication needed for intercourse. However, never use any kind of oil, such as petroleum jelly or baby 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.

Pain Deep Inside

Most of the time, pain that starts deep inside is a warning sign of some physical problem. Any of the following problems can cause pain when the penis touches the back of the vagina:

- *A cyst on one of the ovaries
- *Infection in the uterus and tubes
- *Endometriosis, a condition in which tissue that acts like the endometrium (the lining of the uterus, which produces menstrual flow) begins to grow outside of the uterus. It often grows behind the uterus, just above the upper end of the vagina, and can form scar tissue.
- *Scar tissue from an old infection or previous surgery

When a woman feels pain deep inside during sex, she may be afraid to have sex. This fear may slow down or stop her sexual response. Then, the vagina may not deepen during sex. The sore areas may then be more easily touched by the penis. A vicious cycle then begins--the less sexual response, the more pain; the more pain, the less sexual response. This can happen even when the physical problem is not changing.

A pelvic exam often gives clues about the causes of deep pain. When the problem persists, however, *laparoscopy* may be necessary to examine the internal female organs. This is an operation in which a slender, light-transmitting instrument, the laparoscope, is placed through the navel to look at the uterus, tubes, and ovaries. It is done in an operating room under general anesthesia. Conditions such as scar tissue and endometriosis can often be treated at the same time.

Anatomy

Women often think that pain during intercourse is due to one of two things--that the woman herself is "too small" (or otherwise abnormal) or that her partner is "too large". Neither is usually true. Physical problems or birth defects of the vagina are rare. Normally, a woman's vagina is able to expand to permit the birth of a full-term baby. Studies show that the size of an erect penis is about the same in all men, no matter what the size may be before erection.

Although the size of the penis or the vagina is sometimes thought to be the cause, vaginal muscle spasm or lack of lubrication is often the real problem. Surgery to change the size of the vaginal opening or to repair a birth defect is needed only very rarely. Such surgery should be done only after other techniques, such as vaginal relaxation or dilation, have been given a chance to work.

Emotional Aspects

Pain during intercourse also can be linked to unhappy events in a woman's life. Women may have fears and anxieties about sex. Sometimes women who were abused at an early age may have sexual problems even if they do not remember the abuse. If you have been abused it is very important that you tell your health care provider. You may wish to seek counseling. Some women may feel pain during intercourse if they have problems in a relationship. It is a good idea to discuss your concerns with your partner or with others. Depending on the emotional factors involved, sex counseling or other types of counseling may be needed for the woman or the couple.

It is important to tell your doctor about your fears and concerns, too. He/she will need this information to provide the best treatment for you.

Finally...

When pain is not treated promptly or well, fears and anxiety about sex, as well as symptoms, worsen. Delay in getting proper help often makes the problem worse and harder to treat. Counseling or education can help. Then, decreased pain can reassure the couple and help them to solve the problem.

If it is treated early and effectively, pain during intercourse can and should be a problem that does not last. It is important to talk with your doctor to find out why you may be having pain. Whatever the cause, the problem can be treated so that you can enjoy a good sex life.