

What is vaginal dryness?

Vaginal dryness is not having enough natural lubrication (wetness/moisture) in the vagina. It occurs when estrogen levels are low. This can happen naturally (example: menopause) or from cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy, pelvic radiation, or hormone treatment. When it happens, the vaginal walls become dry and less flexible, making the tissue more prone to tears. This can lead to pain during sexual activity. If vaginal dryness is left untreated, it may lead to an increased risk of recurrent urinary tract infections (UTIs).

Symptoms

- Vaginal irritation, soreness, itching.
- Watery vaginal discharge.
- Pain or discomfort during sexual activity.
- Light bleeding after sexual intercourse.
- Burning when urinating.

Talk with your cancer care team and with your partner about your symptoms.

Treatment options

The goal of treatment for vaginal dryness is to reduce symptoms, heal tissues, and restore vaginal health. Several treatment options, combined with healthy living strategies, can help.

Local hormonal treatment

Your cancer care team may recommend low dose estrogen, lidocaine, or dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) hormonal treatments. These are moisturizers that release a small amount of hormones like estrogen, testosterone, or DHEA into the vagina. These treatments are by prescription only.

You should only use hormonal treatment if your cancer care team says it's OK, especially if you currently have, or once had, a hormone-sensitive cancer.

- **Vaginal creams:** Estrogen enters the bloodstream more easily with estrogen creams than with estrogen tablets or rings. It is important to use the same amount of cream every time to be consistent. Estrace® is an example.
- **Vaginal rings:** A ring can be easier to use and stays in place for 90 days. The ring releases the same amount of estrogen every day for 90 days. Examples are Estring® and Femring®.
- **Vaginal tablets:** Small tablets are inserted into the vagina. Vagifem® is an example.

Note: If you are using non-hormonal vaginal moisturizers, do not use them on the same night as vaginal estrogens as it may result in increased absorption of the hormone into your blood stream.

Systemic hormone treatment

Ospemifene (Osphena®) is an oral (pill) hormone that may be recommended for cancer survivors who have pain during sex and/or vaginal dryness and do not have a history of hormone-sensitive cancer. This medicine is available only by prescription.

VAGINAL DRYNESS

Non-hormonal treatments

Moisturizers, lubricants, and natural oils are recommended if vaginal dryness is not too severe.

DO NOT USE oil-based lubricants with condoms or vaginal diaphragms, as it may cause the material to break down and tear. Instead, **USE water-based, silicone lubricants, spermicidal gels with latex or polyurethane condoms.**

Read the ingredients on the label carefully when deciding what product is best for you. Watch out for ingredients you are allergic to. Some products may also have ingredients that you need to avoid because of the potential for irritation or increased risk of infection.

For example:

- **Glycerin** may increase the risk of bacterial and yeast infections.
- **Propylene glycol** may cause irritation.
- **Petroleum** coats skin and blocks pores, increasing the chance of an infection.
- **Chlorhexidine gluconate** may cause irritation.

Vaginal moisturizers

Vaginal moisturizers can provide long-term relief from itchiness and irritation and may help restore healthier internal tissues (vagina) and external tissues (vulva). Tissues that are healthier are more elastic, thicker, and may produce natural lubrication. Vaginal moisturizers are inserted into the vagina to increase water content of the cells of the vaginal walls. No prescription is needed. These products can be messy because the vagina absorbs what it needs and releases the rest, so you may want to wear a panty-liner (choose soft-lined ones to reduce friction and skin irritation).

Cancer patients and survivors may need to apply moisturizers more often than what is recommended by the product's packaging. Ideally, moisturize 3 to 5 times per week. For best absorption, apply at bedtime while lying down.

The list in this information sheet is not inclusive of all products. These products can frequently change. Read the ingredients on the label of the product closely and discuss with your cancer care team.

Product name	Description	Condom compatibility
AH! YES® water-based vaginal moisturizer	Water-based, hypoallergenic. No stickiness, fragrance, color, taste, or residue. Also available in pre-filled applicators.	Compatible with latex and polyisoprene condoms.
Good Clean Love Restore® moisturizing gel	Water-based. No glycerin, parabens, or artificial fragrances. Comes with a reusable applicator.	Compatible with latex and polyisoprene condoms.
Good Clean Love Bionourish® Ultra moisturizing vaginal gel with hyaluronic acid	Water-based with hyaluronic acid for sustained moisturizing. No glycerin, parabens, or artificial fragrances. Comes with reusable applicators.	Compatible with latex and polyisoprene condoms.

Lubricants

Lubricants can help relieve vaginal dryness temporarily by reducing friction during sexual activity. Lubricants are best used within 30 minutes before intercourse, both externally and internally. These products do not require a prescription. **Do not** use lubricants that are flavored, scented, or advertise a “warming sensation,” as these products may be irritating. There are four general types of lubricants described below.

Water-based lubricants are non-greasy, thin, and become sticky quickly. Use these products right before sexual activity. Water-based products are easy to remove, do not stain, are safe with condoms, internally, externally, and with vibrators or dilators. They may leave a residue until they are washed off. They have the lowest chance of an allergic reaction.

Silicone-based lubricants feel slick and are not sticky. They are not absorbed by the skin, so they last longer than water-based lubricants. They can be difficult to remove. All silicone-based lubricants should be washed off after sexual activity. Silicone-based lubricants should not be used with silicone rubber toys or silicone dilators because combining two silicone-based materials will break them down over time.

Hybrid lubricants are a mixture of water and silicone-based products. They have a natural feel and last longer because of the silicone. Like other silicone-based lubes, hybrid lubricants should not be used with silicone sex toys or dilators.

Oil-based lubricants can damage latex condoms and sex toys. This includes baby oil, petroleum jelly, olive oil, and vegetable oils.

Product name	Description	Condom compatibility
Good Clean Love Almost Naked[®] organic personal lubricant	Water-based, with soothing aloe. No parabens, glycerin, or artificial fragrance.	Compatible with latex and polyisoprene condoms.
Good Clean Love Bionude[®] ultra-sensitive lubricant	Water-based, with plant-based materials. Hypoallergenic. No parabens, glycerin, scents or flavors.	Compatible with latex and polyisoprene condoms.
AH! YES[®] water-based intimate lubricant	Water-based. Hypoallergenic. No parabens, glycerin, scents, or flavors.	Compatible with latex and polyisoprene condoms.
Pink[®] silicone lubricant	Silicone-based, hypoallergenic. No glycerin, paraben, or flavors.	Compatible with latex and polyisoprene condoms.

Some moisturizers and lubricants that are popular and widely available have a very high osmolality (concentration of particles) and/or pH (acidity), which can cause irritation and increased dryness to the vagina. The products in the tables above have been confirmed to be a very close match to the osmolality and pH of the vagina and are unlikely to cause irritation. Dana Farber’s Friends’ Place shop has some of these products available for purchase.

Natural products

- **Vitamin E suppositories** can be used as a moisturizer and lubricant. **Do not** use with latex condoms or toys.
- **Natural oils** can be soothing for use during bathing or sexual intercourse. These include coconut oil, grapeseed oil, sweet almond oil, sunflower oil, castor oil, apricot oil, and extra virgin olive oil.
 - Oils should be pure (without other oils or additives).
 - Avoid natural oils if you are prone to urinary tract infections, yeast infections, or have diabetes.
 - Also remember that oil-based lubricants can break down condoms, diaphragms, and other latex products.

Plant-based hormonal products

Some natural products mimic hormones like estrogen and progestin. You should speak with your cancer care team about the use of these products.

- **Wild Yam and Black Cohosh:** Studies so far show **no effect** on vaginal dryness.
- **Kudzu:** Studies so far are small and do not show that they work well to treat vaginal dryness.

Healthy living and wellness strategies

- Quit smoking / do not smoke.
- Continue regular sexual activity.
- Avoid scented creams and anti-itch products.
- **Do not** douche (insert water and other fluids into the vagina to clean or eliminate odor).
- Wear loose-fitting cotton underwear.
- Drink at least 8 glasses of fluid a day.
- Avoid using anything in or around the vaginal area that could be irritating, including lotions, perfumes, harsh soaps, deodorants, and tampons.

If you experience continued pain or discomfort, please speak with your doctor or nurse.

Dana-Farber's Sexual Health Program

Dana-Farber's Sexual Health Program is part of the Dana-Farber Survivorship Program and offers evaluation, education, treatment, and counseling for individuals and couples with sexual health concerns. The program serves cancer patients and survivors of all ages, genders, and sexual orientations. Their clinical team includes a psychologist, gynecologist, urologist, two endocrinologists, and a fertility expert. Contact the program directly or ask your cancer care team for a referral. To learn more, visit www.dana-farber.org/sexualhealth, call 617-632-4523, or email sexualhealthprogram@dfci.harvard.edu

The instructions in this teaching sheet are for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your doctor or other qualified health provider with any questions regarding your medical condition. If you experience any significant change in your health during or after treatment, contact a member of your cancer care team right away.