

Dyspareunia Factsheet

What is dyspareunia?

Dyspareunia is pain during or after sexual intercourse.

What causes dyspareunia?

There are many causes of dyspareunia the table below discusses many of these reasons.

Vulva vestibulitis syndrome

- the most common being provoked vestibulitis (also known as vulva vestibulitis syndrome or vulvodynia - see vulvodynia factsheet).

Vaginal Stenosis

- adhesions can form in the vagina or vaginal stenosis can occur after surgery or radiotherapy. These adhesions and changes can lead to pain and difficulties with sex

Hormonal changes

- lack of lubrication and thinning of the vaginal wall can occur with hormonal changes for example in pregnancy, when women are breastfeeding and during the menopausal period. This can lead to pain from dryness

Post childbirth or trauma

- after a tear or episiotomy can be very painful. The wound can form a scar and this can then cause pain with intercourse.
- trauma can also occur to the vagina through injury or forceful intercourse

Fear and anxiety

- due to past experiences and fear of failure

Many people have pain during sex and this can sometimes stop couples from having penetrative sex. It is normal for sex to be painful particularly the first time a woman has sex. But the way in which each individual manages this pain is different. For a partner it can be difficult to see a loved one in pain and to be the person that causes the pain. This can lead to sexual difficulties within the relationship.

Sex is also a very emotional act. A lot of us worry if we will be good at sex, will the other person enjoy sex. Each individual also has a different opinion of what sex should entail, how it should be performed, and the way we would like to have sex. Individuals also have differing religious beliefs about sex and what is appropriate. We all have different experiences of sex, some of these experiences will be good and some will be bad which can all affect the way our body reacts to sex. These emotional thoughts can sometimes make us feel more pain than we necessarily need to, due to fear and anxiety.

How can physiotherapy help?

Physiotherapy can help dyspareunia by normalising the muscles response to pain, and teaching you how to relax your body, or focusing on realising adhesions and reversing stenosis. This is done through relaxation, breathing techniques, increasing awareness of your pelvic floor muscles and teaching you how to relax these muscles.

The physiotherapist may also suggest using vaginal dilators or biofeedback to help with your symptoms of pain.

The physiotherapy may also suggest perineal massage and other forms of manual therapy to help with pain.

5 top tips for dyspareunia

1. Use lubrication with intercourse. There are many types of lubrications but natural lubrications tend to work best. 'SYLK' or 'YES' lubrication are recommended.
2. Try different positions - some women will find being on top a better position for them as they are in control, others will find they need to be fully relaxed in lying or side lying.
3. Talk to your partner, let them know how you feel, find out how they feel.
4. Try to relax when having sex, soft or slow rhythmic music may help.
5. Don't give up, if it is important to have sex for you and your partner, for whatever reason, it is achievable.