



Dealing with Painful Intercourse

Pain during intercourse is a problem that is so emotional and sensitive that many women find it difficult to consult a physician. But it's important to seek treatment, and in many cases the cause is a physical illness that can be treated.

Painful intercourse, which a doctor may call dyspareunia, is a burning, tearing, ripping, or aching sensation associated with penetration. The pain can be at the vaginal opening, deep in the pelvis, or anywhere in between. It also may be felt throughout the entire pelvic area and the sexual organs, or may occur only with deep thrusting.

The most common explanation is irritation of the vagina caused by having intercourse without being sufficiently aroused and lubricated. This experience can create a vicious cycle, leading a woman to fear intercourse which in turn makes it more difficult to become become aroused. Women who have had a hysterectomy or mastectomy may have problems with arousal because of both the emotional and physical side effects. Stress or problems in your relationship with a partner can also block arousal. Counseling can help address these psychological issues (visit www.aasect.org to help find a credible counselor or therapist in your area).

Another frequent explanation for painful intercourse is thinning and drying of the vaginal tissue as menopause begins. This happens because the body is producing less and less of the estrogen that is needed to maintain moist vaginal tissue. As the vagina's ability to make its own mucus declines, it becomes dry, itchy, and painful, leading to discomfort during intercourse. Estrogen creams and lubricating gels can help restore moisture, as can estrogen replacement therapy taken in pills or through a patch on the body.

Unintentional muscle spasms of the thighs, pelvis, and vagina can make penetration impossible. This condition, called vaginismus, can develop along with any of the other causes of painful intercourse described here or can result from psychological factors. A traumatic sexual experience, rape, or an irrational fear of genital injury can lead to vaginismus. Counseling or therapy can be extremely helpful.

Other causes of painful intercourse include:

- ~Infection vaginal, pelvic, herpes, infected cysts or boils.
- ~Scars, tumors, or anything that narrows the vagina.
- ~Endometriosis (uterine tissue growing outside the uterus with bleeding, pain and scarring).
- ~Intact hymen (in virginal young women).
- ~Complications of surgery.
- ~Diseases that interfere with the physical process of arousal or orgasm (such as diabetes and multiple sclerosis).

We highly encourage any women experiencing pain during intercourse to consult their physician as well as a trained sex therapist or counselor. Many times your family physician may not have all the answers, so it is important to speak to someone who is experienced in the field of sexual health, as well as consulting your regular doctor.

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