

Vulvar Skin Care: What's All the Fuss?

By Kiran Sigmon, MD, MAHEC Ob/Gyn Specialists

As women, we all know skin care is important. Perhaps that's why it seems like there is a moisturizer or skin care product for every square inch of our body: eye creams, neck creams, night creams, day creams, exfoliating gels, rehydrating lotions, body butter, hand lotion... you get the idea!

Interestingly, very few of us stop to consider the importance of vulvar skin care, even though this is one of the most sensitive parts of our body. If you've never heard those three words put together in a sentence, you might benefit from reading the following skin care tips that we share with patients in our Vulvar Clinic at MAHEC Ob/Gyn Specialists.

Following these simple guidelines can help keep your skin healthy and happy and prevent painful problems from developing.



Rethink soap. Soap can dry the skin leaving it itchy and irritated. Many have perfumes or dyes that can bother genital skin. Gently cleaning with your hand and water is enough to keep vulvar skin at its best. If you occasionally use soap, choose an unscented moisturizing soap and rinse well. Pat dry with a towel; never use a hair dryer! Applying a thin moisturizer like coconut oil can help hold in moisture after bathing.

Ditch the loofah. Loofahs are rough sponges that exfoliate or remove the top protective layer of skin. The top layer of skin not only holds helpful moisture in, it is the body's first line of defense against infection. Women's vulvar skin folds are intended to keep skin moist and strong. An oily outer skin layer is healthy.

Read this before you shave: Our entire skin surface is covered with millions of protective bacteria that make up our unique microbiome. Shaving the hair on the outer lips (labia majora) changes the microbiome and removes a layer of protection for the more delicate inner lips. This can result in skin infections and irritation from urine, semen, or soap residue. Better to let those good bacteria thrive in a nice forested environment. If you must tame the forest, it is better to carefully trim this hair with scissors than shave.

Beware of over-the-counter vaginal creams. As a vulvar skin specialist, I get to see an interesting assortment of genital rashes and skin reactions. Everything from poison ivy to serious allergic reactions to over-the-counter products. Vaginal creams that contain benzocaine temporarily numb the skin and can relieve itching and burning, but they can also cause skin inflammation. When the numbing effect wears off, it can be tempting to use more cream, which causes more inflammation. If the recommendations listed here don't relieve discomfort, be sure to consult your healthcare provider.

Wet wipes vs. toilet paper. There is no medical advantage to using wet wipes after going to the bathroom. Even the “free” versions contain some preservatives. There is also no science (that I am aware of) to recommend one brand of toilet paper over the other. It is important to wipe front to back, be gentle with your skin, and limit wipes to just what is needed. If you use wet wipes, use fragrance free ones and rinse the whole stack before use.



Check your pads. Sanitary and urinary incontinence pads contain preservatives that are potential allergens for some women. If you are a “sensitive skin” lady (you know who you are), especially if you clip or shave, consider switching brands to see if that relieves the irritation.

Down with douching. Remember the microbiome mentioned in tip number 3? The vagina has its own special and protective colony of healthy bacteria. Douching is like a tidal wave that can wipe out that entire colony of good bacteria. Don't do it.

Boost your biome. Ways you can support your vaginal microbiome in addition to the tips listed here include eating well (veggies, fruit, whole grains, healthy fats, and lots of water), using condoms with all new sexual partners (who have their own unique microbiome), and taking a probiotic supplement to replenish good bacteria when you are given antibiotics.



Pads, tampons, menstrual cups oh my!

Women have no shortage of options during the time of month when we are in the “flow.” If you use tampons, be sure to change them every 4-6 hours even on light days. When using pads, try applying a bit of petrolatum or baby ointment to protect delicate vulvar and bottom skin toward the end of your cycle when chaffing can occur. Menstrual cups should be emptied, cleaned, and reinserted throughout the day and cleaned carefully each month

according to product instructions (which vary).

Diarrhea, constipation, incontinence. The vagina is located between the rectum where bowel movements come out and urethra where urine exits. When either system is out of balance, the vagina and vulvar skin can be affected. Diarrhea, hard stools, and urinary or fecal incontinence can cause irritation, soreness, and even tearing of the skin from frequent wiping and stretching. There are many zinc oxide-based skin products (think baby ointments) that can protect the skin around the vulva and rectum if this occurs. Apply them generously and often. See your healthcare provider if any of these conditions is ongoing as it may represent an underlying problem that has a medical solution.

Following the recommendations above should help you and your vulva stay happy and healthy. Genital symptoms that are RED flags that should prompt a visit to your healthcare provider, not a trip to the drugstore, include:

- Vulvar and/or vaginal itching that you can't stop scratching or thinking about scratching
- A change in vaginal odor that lasts for more than a few days and is associated with itching, irritation, or lower belly pain
- Pain with sex or tampon insertion
- A sensation of burning, rawness, or pain of the external skin that keeps you from wearing certain clothes, sitting, or biking—even if the skin looks normal
- A new lump, sore, or rough spot on the vulvar skin

Don't forget to pay attention to your overall health and stress levels as well. Imbalances in any area of our lives can cause physical symptoms and discomfort. When I see patients with any longstanding health concern, we always review their relationship to the self, nature, and others.

Do your best to rest, exercise, eat well, drink lots of water, get into and enjoy nature daily, reach out to and share gratitude with those you love, and be gentle with yourself. Do your best at work and home, and let the rest go.

Vulvar health, and women's health in general, has a lot to do with being our best self, physically and emotionally.



Dr. Kiran Sigmon is a general obstetrician and gynecologist at MAHEC Ob/Gyn Specialists with a particular interest in the diagnosis and management of vulvar skin disease and sexual pain. She started the MAHEC Vulvar Clinic in 2006 to assist other providers in the WNC region with difficult cases including recurrent vaginitis, lichen sclerosis, lichen planus, lichen simplex chronicus and vulvodynia, to name a few. She works with other local providers to provide patients with opportunities to explore treatments including physical therapy, acupuncture, and nutritional counseling. She also helps patients address the psychosocial components of living with chronic pain by working closely with local mental health professionals. Dr. Sigmon feels strongly about educating patients, other providers and the community about issues related to genital health and sexuality, and many local physicians rotate seeing patients with her in the Vulvar Clinic.