

GENITAL SKIN CARE

FACT SHEET

Genital skin is the skin on and around the penis, vulva/vagina and anus. This area of skin is sensitive and needs special care to keep healthy.

Washing the genitals too much can cause this area to become sore and irritated. Irritation in the genitals is often thought to be due to infections but a common cause is hygiene e.g. washing habits.

There is no need to use specialised genital cleaning products to care for genital skin. These products contain ingredients in them which can irritate this area.

What is the best way to wash genital skin?

Use warm water alone and/or:

- wash with a PH balanced wash for sensitive skin such as Dermaveen®, Aveeno® Cetaphil®, QV®,
- use an unperfumed moisturiser such as aqueous cream or sorbolene. These are the only products suitable for the vulva, penis and around the anus. Never use these products inside the vagina or anus – warm water only should be used here.

Due to the sensitivity of this area it's best to dry by patting gently.

What should I avoid when washing the genitals?

Do not rub or scrub your genitals.

Do not wash with perfumed products, soaps or shower gels.

Do not wash inside the vagina (douching).

Try to **avoid** the following irritants:

- cleansing wipes e.g. hygiene wipes, baby wipes
- disinfectants (which may also be included in some washing detergents)
- tea tree oil
- paw paw ointment
- bubble baths/bath bombs
- medicated skin treatments (unless prescribed by your healthcare professional)
- perfumed washing liquid and fabric softeners (use hypoallergenic)
- daily use of panty liners or pads (only use during your period)
- contact with moisture for long periods e.g. sweat, urine, water
- scratching
- hair removal e.g. shaving, laser treatment
- tight clothing

Sexual activity and genital skin care

Friction due to sexual activity can irritate the genitals. Lubrication (lube) can help reduce this friction for vaginal and anal sex. Use a water-based lube if condoms are being used as oils can weaken condoms.

If condoms are not being used, then oil-based lube can be used. Alternatively, any vegetable-based oil can also be used such as olive, coconut or almond oils.

It is recommended to always urinate after sex or masturbating and to rinse the genitals in warm water and gently pat dry. This will reduce your risk of irritation.

Vaginal discharge

The vagina contains lots of good bacteria called lactobacilli which thrive in this acidic area. Lactobacilli are essential for protecting the vagina and keeping it healthy.

Vaginal discharge is fluid that comes from the vagina, this is completely normal. It can be clear, cream or yellow in colour but should not smell or itch. It is normal for some people to produce a lot of discharge and some people to produce very little.

Discharge can vary from person to person and can also vary at different times throughout the menstrual cycle (the time between your usual periods). Discharge can vary depending on your age and hormonal changes (for example, your hormones can change depending on the stage of your natural menstrual cycle, or while taking hormonal contraception).

Use of the irritants mentioned earlier can also cause a discharge. For example, using soap in the vagina can alter the natural balance and cause discharge as a result. Sometimes, just by stopping douching or using perfumed wash products the symptoms will resolve without the need for medication but it's a good idea to see a doctor if they don't improve.

Vulval/vaginal irritation and infection

The skin of the vulva is very delicate making irritation common. Irritation can be a sign of infection. It's a good idea to see a GP if you're experiencing vulval/vaginal symptoms such as itch or a new discharge.

Overgrowth of bacteria

An overgrowth of bacteria will often cause a change in discharge which can become watery and may have a fishy smell to it. This is called bacterial vaginosis, see SHINE SA's **Bacterial Vaginosis Fact Sheet** for more information.

Thrush/Overgrowth of yeast

An overgrowth of yeast will often cause a change in discharge which can be white, thick or thin and itchy. This often causes the vulva to become irritated when the discharge meets the vulva. This irritation can be made worse by using panty liners as it keeps the irritating discharge in contact with the vulva.

There are treatments for thrush that you can buy from the chemist. If these don't work or you're finding you need to use them regularly the symptoms you have may not be thrush and you should see a doctor.

Other causes of irritation

Genital irritation can also be caused by sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including herpes, chlamydia, gonorrhoea, trichomoniasis and genital warts.

Skin conditions can also be the cause of irritation including lichen sclerosis, lichen planus, dermatitis and eczema.

If you do experience any vulval or vaginal irritation, it's a good idea to speak to a GP or visit a sexual health clinic to find the cause of the irritation.

Penis hygiene

The genital skin on the penis and scrotum are on the outside of the body so are naturally cool and dry. The head of the penis (the glans) can produce a white substance called smegma. Smegma is a combination of dead skin cells and skin secretions such as oil and sweat. It is harmless but it can build up and cause irritation, particularly under the foreskin which can create a warm, moist environment. If it does build up then it may start to smell and potentially allow bacteria to breed. This can then cause inflammation and can develop into a condition called balanitis. It may also cause the foreskin to stick to the head of the penis which will make erections painful.

Balanitis

Symptoms of balanitis can include redness, swelling, an itch, discharge, an unpleasant smell and a blotchy red rash on the head of the penis. This is not sexually transmitted. It is more likely to occur if you have not washed for a few days, particularly if there has been sexual activity.

Balanitis is best managed with good hygiene habits. It should not need any medication. Good hygiene habits include washing the penis once a day, with warm water alone or using soap substitute as mentioned in the **What is the best way to wash genital skin?** section.

If you have a foreskin, gently pull it back to wash the head of the penis and, very importantly, allow to dry completely before replacing the foreskin. You should also pull back the foreskin when you are urinating. This will prevent urine from touching the foreskin which can sit on the head of the penis and cause irritation. If your foreskin is tight and does not pull back easily, you should see your doctor to discuss. Never forcibly pull back on the foreskin as this can cause scarring.

Where can I get more information?

- You can visit SHINE SA for further information, testing and treatment.

You can also:

- Make an appointment with your local doctor, health care provider or Aboriginal Health service.
- Contact Adelaide Sexual Health Centre: drop in or phone. 275 North Terrace, Adelaide
Call: 7117 2800

CONTACT
SHINE SA

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Clinic & Counselling Appointments and General Enquiries

Tel 8300 5300

Clinic locations and times are available at www.shinesa.org.au

Sexual Healthline

Tel 1300 883 793 **Country callers (toll free)** 1800 188 171

Talk to a sexual health nurse about any sexual health issue.

Available 9:00am – 12:30pm, Monday – Friday

National Relay Service

www.relayservice.gov.au

133 677 (TTY/Voice) 1300 555 727 (Speak & Listen) 0423 677 767 (SMS Relay)