

Contact dermatitis of the vulva can occur alone, or it can complicate any other vulvar skin condition like a yeast infection, herpes, psoriasis, lichen sclerosus, or eczema.

## CONTACT DERMATITIS OF THE VULVA

### Alastin® Recovery Balm

This skincare product can be helpful to soothe and heal the vulva when irritated. It keeps the vulva moist and lubricated which can decrease irritations and is excellent as a barrier against pads/clothing. Also, it can be used as often as desired. Alastin® Recovery Balm is available for purchase in Dr. Schultis' office.

### **What is contact dermatitis?**

Contact dermatitis is a reaction that results when the skin responds to a substance that is applied to it. This can either be a burn, irritation, or an allergic reaction. Examples of things that can cause this are creams, ointments, gels, sprays, sanitary pads, dyes, or clothing. The rash may occur suddenly with blisters, itching and weeping (like a reaction to poison ivy) or it may be of slower onset with redness, burning and some swelling. Other symptoms may include unrelenting itching, redness and swelling, raw feeling, damp, or wet feeling from weeping of the irritated skin surface (some women mistake their dampness as vaginal discharge), pain with insertion of a tampon, speculum, or with intercourse.

### **Where does it occur?**

Any part of the vulva or perineum may be involved, from the mons pubis to the anus, even out onto the inner parts of the thighs. The extent of the rash will depend on where the offending substance has touched the skin and how sensitive you are.

### **What are the different types of contact dermatitis?**

There are two types.

- 1) **Irritant** contact dermatitis – this is the most common cause of vulvar contact dermatitis. It is a reaction to a caustic or irritating product that injures the skin. Repeated exposure to mildly irritating products like soaps or gels can eventually burn the skin causing an irritated contact dermatitis. Urine and vaginal secretions touching the skin can also cause a similar problem. Two of the most common causes of an **irritant** vulvar reactions are cleansing too often using too strong a cleanser or soap and the second can be the result of lack of estrogen that causes the skin barrier to be weakened/thinned, less moist and pliable.
- 2) **Allergic** contact dermatitis – this is a reaction on the skin that develops due to your body's allergic response to a substance, like poison ivy, applied to the skin surface. Possible causes of such a reaction in the vulvar area are benzocaine (found in local anesthetic creams), neomycin (antibiotic creams), preservatives (in toilet wipes, emollients and prescribed steroid creams or ointments) or perfumes (widely used in many hygiene products). Like irritant contact dermatitis, these reactions may be mild with just minor redness, swelling or severe with blistering, bright red swelling and discomfort.

### **What does it look like? What does it feel like?**

Often, there is a rash or irritation seen on the vulva. One can feel a varying degree of itching, burning and irritation that can be mild to severe depending on one's reaction. The discomfort can start very slowly and build up with repeated use of the offending product or it can be very sudden in onset with a severe reaction to a product that is very irritating or to which you have a strong allergic response. In the severe reactions, there can be blistering and open weeping, tender red areas, tears and sometimes bleeding. More often there is redness with swelling and sometimes crusting. With scratching, crusting can be worse.

### **How is it diagnosed?**

Classically the diagnosis is based on the history of exposure to the offending substance, pattern of the rash and sometimes biopsy. Often it is the diagnosis of exclusion when no other reason for the vulvar symptoms can be found. If the reaction is due to an allergy, then special patch testing may be done with a number of chemicals and placed on your back for 3 days to determine what is causing the reaction. This can be performed by a dermatologist or an allergist.

### **How is it treated?**

#### **STOP ALL UNNECESSARY VULVAR CONTACTANTS!**

- 1) The offending substance must be stopped!! However, unfortunately it may never be identified. A cortisone/steroid ointment applied to the area in a thin layer maybe prescribed twice a day for one to two weeks. Overuse may result in thinning of the skin and could make the problem worse. If the reaction is severe, oral cortisone may be used.
- 2) Be sure to stop any possible contributing irritating factors. Stop using all soap because excessive soap and water strip away the skin's protective cover. When washing, just use plain water or plain water with your hands only and gently rinse the area, then pat dry. To protect the skin, Alastin® Recovery Balm is preferred (available in Dr. Schultis' office), plain petroleum or zinc oxide ointment.
- 3) For dampness you can use Alastin® Recovery Balm. Depending on your own reaction, other options are Gold Bond or Zeasorb Powder. **Do not** use powders with cornstarch.
- 4) Other Suggestions:
  - **Do not** wear pads daily.
  - Change your underclothes when they are damp.
  - **Do not** sleep in underwear at night.
  - Use Alastin® or coconut oil to protect the vulvar skin when not using a steroid ointment.
  - **You can** use a skin protectant on your vulva as often as you need.  
We suggest that you use a thin layer of:
    - Alastin® is preferred (available in Dr. Schultis' office)
    - Coconut oil
    - Zinc oxide ointment
    - White petroleum (Vaseline™)
  - **You can** put this on as often as you need to protect the skin.
  - It also helps to lower skin irritation during your period and when you urinate.

#### **Common Vulvar Irritants include:**

- Body soaps, cleansers, gels, lotions, bubble bath, bath salts, bath oils, softeners
- Feminine products (i.e., douches, sprays, perfumes, powders, vaginal deodorants, over-the-counter vaginal creams and ointments
- Laundry detergents (especially with enzymes, whiteners, brighteners) fabric softeners, dryer sheets
- Sweat
- Urine, Feces

- Spermicide
- Deodorized panty liners, pads, tampons, adult, or baby wipes/towelettes, colored or perfumed (aloe) toilet paper
- Nylon underwear or panty hose

**Vulvar Allergens (those causing an allergic response) include**

- Perfume
- Preservatives (some moist toilet wipes)
- Benzocaine (Vagisil)
- Neomycin (Neosporin)
- Chlorhexidine (KY)
- Lanolin
- Latex Condoms