

FACT SHEET – VAGINISMUS

You may have Vaginismus if you are a woman who experiences...

- Pain due to tightening of the vagina during intercourse
- Painful sensation during insertion of the penis/ failure to achieve penile penetration due to pain
- Difficulty having a gynecological exam involving the vagina performed
- Sexual pain and discomforts after giving birth or undergoing a surgical procedure involving the female reproductive system
- Troubled relationship between partners
- Lack of interest to engage in sex due to pain

A Closer Look

Women who frequently experience vaginal discomfort during intercourse, such as pain and burning sensations, are probably suffering from the condition known as Vaginismus. Vaginismus is the result of involuntary tightening of the vaginal walls, making penetration during intercourse difficult or even impossible. This is usually manifested by the following symptoms:

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The Causes of Vaginismus

Vaginismus can either be due to psychological or physical causes.

Psychological causes - almost 90% of women suffering from Vaginismus have one or more of the following psychological issues:

- Fear of getting pregnant
- Anticipating intercourse as a painful act
- Performance anxiety related to intercourse
- Traumatic sexual experiences in the past
- Childhood memories of sexual abuse
- Poor emotional attachment between partners
- Lack of knowledge regarding sex

Physical causes – 10% of Vaginismus in women is due to the following physical causes:

- Infections involving the female reproductive system
- Difficult normal vaginal deliveries; complicated c-sections
- Physical, sexual abuse, harassment, or rape
- Hormonal imbalance resulting to vaginal dryness
- Increasing age (menopausal stage) resulting to poor vaginal lubrication
- Pelvic pain from trauma or previous surgery

Common Misconceptions on Vaginismus

A woman with one or more of the above symptoms probably has Vaginismus. But, it is also important to know some myths regarding this female health condition to clarify what is and is not Vaginismus. Here are some of the common misconceptions:

- A woman with a small vagina is more likely to suffer from Vaginismus during intercourse. **Wrong.** Normally, the vagina is flexible enough to expand and accommodate a penis that is fully erect. However, involuntary tightening of the vaginal muscles lead to painful intercourse.
- Vaginismus occurs only during intercourse. **False.** Vaginismus may occur even before penile penetration happens, making intercourse difficult or even impossible.
- An intact hymen is the reason why a woman may suffer from Vaginismus. **Not true.** The involuntary tightening of the vaginal muscles happens subconsciously and is not due to the presence or absence of a hymen.
- A woman who has already given birth may not suffer from Vaginismus. **Wrong.** Remember that there are cases of mothers who after vaginal delivery started to experience Vaginismus due to a painful or traumatic experience during the birth process.
- Vaginismus is more common in single than married women. **Not true.** A woman's civil status has nothing to do with Vaginismus. It may occur to both single and married women.

- Vaginismus is just a condition that goes away on its own without the need for any intervention. **False.** A woman suffering from Vaginismus needs to seek assistance from people who are experts in the field of treating the problem. The earlier she seeks help, the higher the chances of having pain-free intercourse.

How Common is Vaginismus?

According to statistics, about two out of 1000 women suffer from Vaginismus. The Center for Human Sexuality in New York noted that 40% of women who sought help from the institute were found to be suffering from Vaginismus. In Ireland, a sexual therapist noted that five out of 1000 troubled marriages were due to Vaginismus in women.

However, health care professionals believe that there are more women out there who have the same condition but are afraid to seek medical help for fear of suffering from social disgrace and humiliation.

Is Vaginismus Treatable?

Women and couples who have sought professional help to treat Vaginismus were successfully cured after thoroughly following their treatment program. Clinical statistics showed that those who have complied with the methods of their treatment program have higher success rates compared to those who failed to follow and complete the treatment.

According to different, independent studies, the success rate of treatment for Vaginismus is around 75% – 100%, depending on the woman's compliance with her program. Vaginismus is highly treatable!

Treatment Plans

Unlike other sexual function disorders, Vaginismus is one of the many sexual function conditions in women that is highly treatable and can be successfully resolved with proper treatment. A treatment program is usually designed by a certified therapist based upon the problems and needs of a woman.

The common methods of treatment included in the program are the following:

- *Psychotherapy* – Since 90% of Vaginismus is due to different psychological issues, psychotherapy helps women understand their condition. This method lets them express their fears, emotions, and relationship issues with their partners. Psychotherapy is considered the most important part of the program as it helps both the therapist and client fully understand the most probable cause of the problem.
- *Relaxation Techniques* – These are methods composed of different relaxation exercises that will help the woman feel calm and relax. The aim of these methods is to allow her let go of emotions that may prevent her from having successful intercourse with her partner.
- *Sexual Anatomy* – This method of the treatment program allows women to understand their feminine sexual anatomy better. The therapist explains how the different areas of the vaginal and pelvic floor muscles may cause pain and penile penetration difficulties. The method also involves thorough explanations on how these parts of women may undergo involuntary tightening.
- *Insertion and Penetration Exercises* – The therapist teaches different techniques that will help relax the pelvic floor muscles. These techniques help women have full control over their sexual anatomy, thereby preventing involuntary tightness and allowing pain-free insertion and full penetration. Vaginal dilators are also used to desensitize the pelvic floor muscles. These reduce the reflexes that may trigger the muscles to tighten and cause painful sensations.
- *Readiness Exercises for Couples* – To successfully resolve Vaginismus, the couple need to work together. These exercises are composed of different exercises and techniques that were designed for couples in order to relieve the involuntary tightening of the pelvic floor muscles and have pain-free penetration during intercourse. The sex therapist also helps build intimacy, trust, and cooperation between partners.

For women to be fully successful in their quest to overcome vaginismus, Dr. Martha Lee strongly believes that their partners should also be part of the treatment program. She is always willing to create different approaches depending on the needs of every couple in order to help them resolve their problems.