



Menopause and Vaginal Atrophy

What causes vaginal atrophy?

During menopause, the production of the reproductive hormone estrogen begins to diminish. This natural decline in estrogen levels often leads to the deterioration of the muscles and tissues that make up the vaginal walls. Vaginal atrophy (or urogenital atrophy) refers to the inflammation of the vagina due to the shrinking and thinning of vaginal tissue. Vaginal atrophy may also occur in pre-menopausal women who are taking certain medications or who suffer from other medical disorders that result in decreased levels of estrogen.

What are the symptoms of vaginal atrophy?

The most common symptoms of vaginal atrophy are vaginal dryness (caused by decreased lubrication), vaginal irritation or soreness, and itching, all of which can lead to painful sexual intercourse and occasional bleeding due to weakened and thinning tissue.

Unfortunately, many times a woman is uncomfortable or hesitant to discuss concerns like these with her health care providers, even though the symptoms can have a significant impact on her quality of life. It is estimated that 35-50% of postmenopausal women experience the symptoms that accompany vaginal atrophy, but just 20-25% of those experiencing symptoms will address their symptoms with their medical provider. The symptoms of vaginal atrophy are not likely to correct without treatment, and for this reason, early screening and timely treatment is crucial.

What are some treatments for vaginal atrophy?

In less serious cases or the beginning stages of vaginal atrophy, use of a water-based lubricant or vaginal moisturizer may relieve symptoms. Normal sexual activity may also be of benefit. Previous levels of sexual functioning may also be recaptured through the use of either hormonal or non-hormonal treatments. The use of local or general estrogen replacement therapies traditionally provides considerable relief from the symptoms associated with vaginal atrophy.

Local or vaginal use of a low-dose topical estrogen treatment before vaginal atrophy becomes severe is often recommended by most health care providers. These treatments include vaginal creams, tablets, or rings which promote the development of cells in vaginal tissue. Overall, the use of vaginal estrogen therapy is widely accepted and successful in the treatment of vaginal atrophy caused by a reduction in estrogen levels.

REFERENCE MATERIALS

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