

What A Pain In The



VULVA!

Common Causes of Vulvar Pain

Infections

Bacterial Vaginosis: Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is a common vaginal infection that happens when some normal bacteria that live in your vagina overgrow, causing a bacterial imbalance. Symptoms include an off-white or gray vaginal discharge that smells “fishy.” BV is easily treatable with antibiotics from a healthcare provider.

Vaginal Yeast Infection: An overgrowth of the fungus candida causes a vaginal yeast infection. A vaginal yeast infection causes the skin around your vagina to burn and itch, and it may change the consistency of your vaginal discharge. Treatment includes antifungal medication.

Chlamydia: Chlamydia is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STIs). You can get chlamydia from intercourse, anal sex or oral sex. Because chlamydia often doesn’t cause symptoms, many people who have chlamydia don’t know it and unknowingly infect other people. Regular screenings can help reduce chlamydia’s spread.

Gonorrhea: Gonorrhea, or “the clap,” is a sexually transmitted infection (STI). Often, gonorrhea doesn’t cause symptoms, especially in women. When present, symptoms differ based on your reproductive parts. See your healthcare provider if you think you’re infected. Prompt treatment with antibiotics can prevent long-term problems.

Herpes: Herpes simplex virus (HSV) causes oral herpes, genital herpes and infections in other areas of your body. Fluid-filled blisters on your skin are common symptoms, but many people have no symptoms at all. A simple blood test can tell you if you have HSV in your body. Antiviral medications can treat single outbreaks or help you manage HSV long-term.

HPV: More than 30 strains of the human papillomavirus (HPV) can affect your genitals. These include harmless forms of HPV, like those that cause genital warts. Only some types of HPV are “high risk” because they can progress to cancer. You can take preventive measures, including the HPV vaccine and getting regular screenings, to reduce your risk.

Syphilis: Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that’s treatable with medication. Without treatment, syphilis causes serious health problems. It can permanently damage your heart, brain, muscles, bones and eyes. To reduce your risk of infection, always use a condom during sex.

Skin Conditions

Folliculitis: A common skin condition, folliculitis happens when a hair follicle becomes infected or inflamed when you get an in-grown pubic hair. This condition may look like acne, often starting out as small red bumps. You can have folliculitis on your face, arms, back, legs and pubic area. Mild cases can be cared for at home, while other cases are treated by a dermatologist.

Contact Dermatitis: Contact dermatitis is caused by irritation of the skin by things such as soaps, fabrics, or perfumes. Signs and symptoms can include extreme itching, rawness, stinging, burning, and pain. Treatment involves avoidance of the source of irritation and stopping the itching so that the skin can heal. Ice packs or cold compresses can reduce irritation. A thin layer of plain petroleum jelly can be applied to protect the skin. Medication may be needed for severe cases.

Lichen simplex chronicus: Lichen simplex chronicus may be a result of contact dermatitis or other skin disorder that has been present for a long time. Thickened, scaly areas called “plaques” appear on the vulvar skin. These plaques cause intense itching that may interfere with sleep. Treatment involves stopping the “itch-scratch” cycle so that the skin can heal. Steroid creams often are used for this purpose. The underlying condition should be treated as well.

Lichen planus: Lichen planus is a skin disorder that most commonly occurs on the mucous membranes of the mouth. Occasionally, it also affects the skin of the genitals. Itching, soreness, burning, and abnormal discharge may occur. The appearance of lichen planus is varied. There may be white streaks on the vulvar skin, or the entire surface may be white. There may be bumps that are dark pink in color. Treatment of lichen planus may include medicated creams or ointments, vaginal tablets, prescription pills, or injections. This condition is difficult to treat and usually involves long-term treatment and follow-up.

Lichen sclerosus: Lichen sclerosus is a chronic inflammatory condition that affects skin on your genitals. Healthcare providers don't understand what causes lichen sclerosus, but they think it may be an autoimmune disease. Treatment may involve medications that you apply directly to your genitals, light therapy, immunosuppressants or circumcision.

Pubic lice (crabs): Pubic lice, also called crabs, are tiny insects that live on your pubic hair, near your genitals. You can get genital crabs through close contact, such as sex. Crabs can cause intense itching, but are treatable and don't cause serious health concerns. Pubic lice treatment usually involves special shampoos or creams to kill the lice.

Scabies: Scabies is caused by the *Sarcoptes scabiei* mite. It causes an intense and itchy rash that can interrupt your sleep. Scabies spreads most often through direct contact with an infected person. Prescription medications can kill the mites and ease your symptoms.

Vulvitis: Vulvitis is inflammation in your vulva, or genitals. Vulvitis is common and can result from an allergic reaction, an infection or an injury. Symptoms include itching, redness and swelling in your vulva. You may also have an abnormal vaginal discharge. Vulvitis is often easily cured once you receive the right treatments.

Vulvar Pain

Dyspareunia: Dyspareunia is genital pain during or after sexual intercourse. You may feel pain externally on your vulva or internally in your vagina, uterus or pelvis. Factors like underlying medical conditions or infections can cause painful sex. Treatment involves identifying the underlying cause of the pain.

Vulvodynia: Vulvodynia is pain in your vulva that lasts longer than three months. Unlike vulvar pain that results from a condition, vulvodynia doesn't have a clear cause. The pain can be so life-altering that it keeps you from engaging in activities you enjoy. Treatment may include medicine, physical therapy, surgery and behavioral health support.

Other Conditions

Bartholin cyst: A Bartholin cyst is a firm, round bump near the opening to your vagina. It can cause irritation and pain but is often painless. Bartholin cysts can heal on their own. A healthcare provider may treat an infected Bartholin cyst by draining it or prescribing an antibiotic.

Imperforate Hymen: An imperforate hymen is when your hymen blocks the opening to your vagina. It's congenital and there is no way to prevent it. Imperforate hymens can cause painful symptoms, but there is a treatment to fix it. Those with an imperforate hymen are able to enjoy sex, get pregnant and have healthy babies after treatment.

Labial adhesions: Labial adhesions occur when the inner lips of the vulva stick together. This generally occurs when estrogen levels are low, and can affect infants, toddlers and adults. The condition may go away without treatment when estrogen levels increase. Estrogen creams and manual or surgical separation can treat more severe cases.

Vulvar Cancer: Vulvar cancer is a rare cancer of your vulva. There are about 6,500 new cases of vulvar cancer in the U.S. each year. Most cases are related to either human papillomavirus (HPV) infection or lichen sclerosus. Changes in vulvar skin color and lumps or open sores may be signs of vulvar cancer. Treatments include surgery, radiation or chemotherapy.

*Sources: <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/body/vulva> and <https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/disorders-of-the-vulva-common-causes-of-vulvar-pain-burning-and-itching>

Vulvodynia

Vulvodynia is an underdiagnosed (and not widely talked about) condition that can severely impact an individual's quality of life. It is the most common cause of painful sex in premenopausal women (Brotto, et. al, 2014). Research indicates that it can impact up to 16% of those with vulvas (Harlow, 2003; Pukall, 2016) and is often misdiagnosed. Up to 60% with the condition consult more than three doctors before receiving an accurate diagnosis, and many are treated for non-existent yeast infections, which can exacerbate the pain (Harlow, 2003). It is important to raise awareness of this condition so that vulva owners can receive the medical care they need to improve quality of life.

What is vulvodynia?

Vulvodynia is chronic vulvar pain characterized by burning, stinging, or stabbing sensations without an identifiable cause. It lasts 3 months or longer and is not caused by an infection, skin disorder, or other medical condition. Some feel the pain constantly, while others only feel it when touch or pressure is applied to the vulva. This condition can make sexual intercourse painful or impossible, and some sufferers are unable to wear pants or tight-fitting clothes or sit for long periods.

Who experiences vulvodynia?

This condition can occur in anyone with a vulva. Age of onset is most common between ages 18 and 25 (Harlow, 2003).

What causes vulvodynia?

While there is no known cause of the condition, there are several correlating factors that may play into the development of vulvodynia:

- Damage or irritation of the nerves of the vulva
- Inflammation of the vulva
- Long-term reactions to infections
- Certain genetic disorders
- Food sensitivities
- Pelvic floor dysfunction
- Conditions that affect nearby muscles or bones

How is vulvodynia diagnosed?

If you have vulvar pain, your gynecologist or other health care professional will try to rule out the most common causes of vulvar pain first. You may be asked questions about your symptoms, sexual history, and medical and surgical history. You may be asked when symptoms occur, what treatments you have tried, and whether you have any allergies, chronic infections, or skin problems.

Your gynecologist will also examine the vulva and vagina carefully. A sample of discharge from the vagina may be taken. Your gynecologist may perform a cotton-swab test. During the test, gentle pressure is applied to various vulvar sites, and you're asked to rate the severity of the pain. If any areas of skin appear suspicious, your provider may examine them with a magnifying instrument or take a biopsy of the area.

How is vulvodynia treated?

Since vulvodynia is not simply a gynecological condition, many experts favor a multi-disciplinary approach to its management.

Current vulvodynia treatments include:

- Discontinuation of Irritants
- Oral "Pain-Blocking" Medications
 - Tricyclic Antidepressants
 - Serotonin-Norepinephrine Reuptake Inhibitors (SNRIs)
 - Anticonvulsants
 - Opioids
- Topical Medications
 - Topical Hormonal Creams (e.g., estrogen, testosterone)
 - Topical Anesthetics (e.g., lidocaine)
 - Topical Compounded Formulations (e.g., anticonvulsant, antidepressant)
- Pelvic Floor Muscle Therapy
- Nerve Blocks
- Neurostimulation and Spinal Infusion Pump
- Surgery (for women with Provoked Vestibulodynia)
- Complementary or Alternative Medicine
- Psychotherapy or counseling for coping with chronic pain

*Source: <https://www.nva.org/what-is-vulvodynia/>, Brotto et al. (2014), Harlow (2003), Pukall (2016), and <https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/vulvodynia>

Resources

Pelvic Health

International Society for the Study of Vulvovaginal Diseases

<https://www.issvd.org/>

The National Association for Continence

<https://nafc.org/category/pelvic-floor/>

<https://nafc.org/bhealth-blog/how-to-identify-your-pelvic-floor-muscles/>

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

<https://www.acog.org/>

National Vulvodynia Association

<https://www.nva.org/>

Vulva Pain Society

<https://vulvalpainsociety.org/>

International Pelvic Pain Society

<https://www.pelvicpain.org/public>

Tami Lynn Kent- Holistic Pelvic Care

<https://www.wildfeminine.com/>

https://www.ted.com/talks/tami_lynn_kent_the_vagina_whisperer

Sexual Trauma

National Sexual Violence Resource Center

<https://www.nsvrc.org/>

Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN)

National Sexual Assault Hotline: 800-656-HOPE (4673)

<https://rainn.org/>

Self-Compassion and Body Positivity

The Body Positive

<https://thebodypositive.org/>

Dr. Kristin Neff

<https://self-compassion.org/>

Shame

Dr. Brené Brown

<https://brenebrown.com/>

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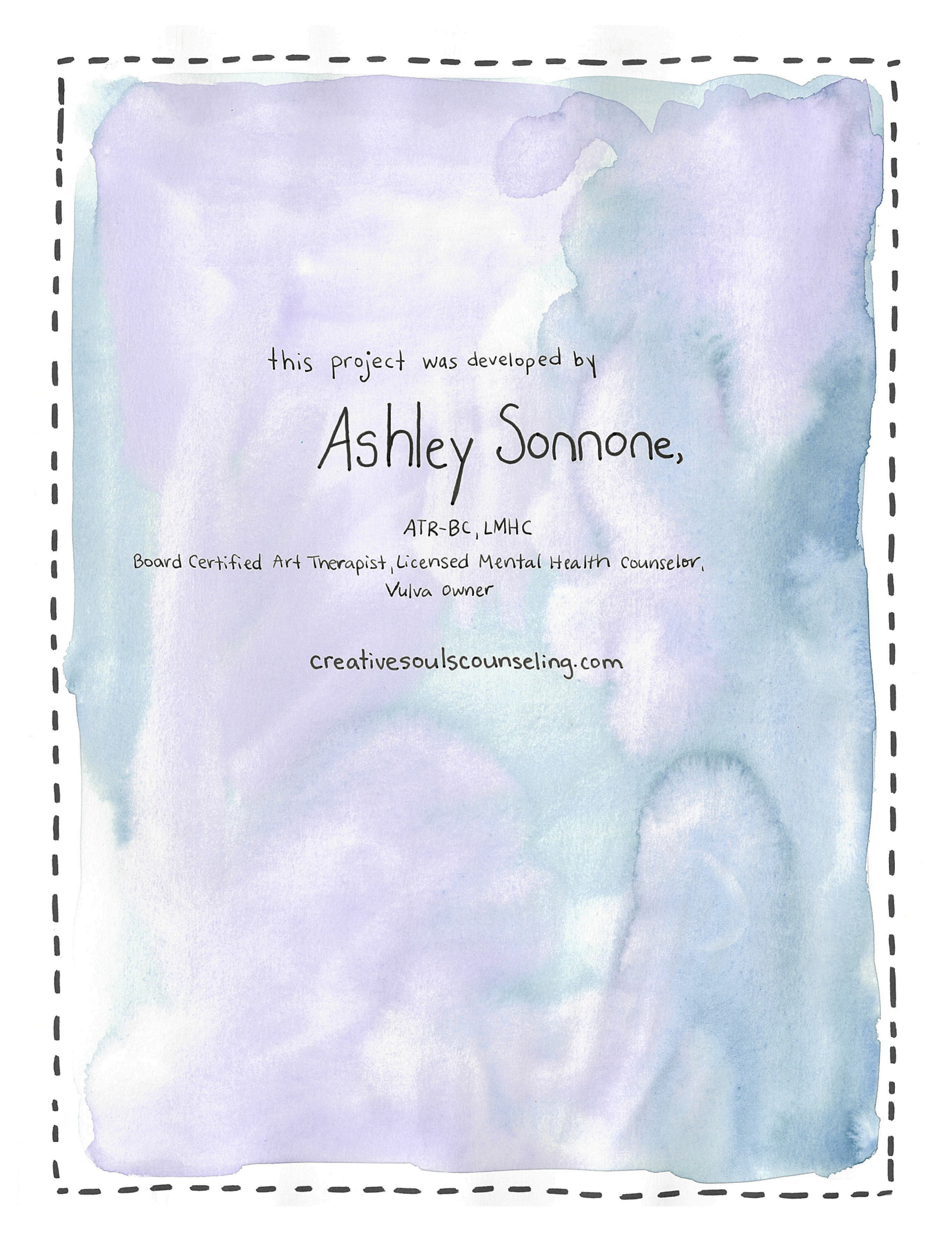
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