Painful Sex, Why Women Do or Don’t Seek Treatment

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Introduction

- Vaginal and vulvar atrophy (VVA), a component of genitourinary syndrome of menopause (GSM), is prevalent and bothersome in postmenopausal women
- Recent estimates suggest that up to 32 million women may be experiencing symptomatic VVA
- Dyspareunia and vaginal dryness most common symptoms
- Chronic condition with symptoms worsening over time
- May negatively affect sexual function, interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and overall quality of life

Objectives

- To identify women’s perceptions of VVA
- To further understand the reasons why women do or do not take prescription Rx therapies for VVA

Methodology

- Women diagnosed with VVA experiencing moderate to severe dyspareunia participated in focus groups held in Tampa, Philadelphia and Chicago from February to March, 2013.
- Groups were defined by:
  - 1 current Rx user group (n=6)
  - 2 mixed groups (both user & non-user; n=12)
  - 3 current Rx non-user groups (n=20)
- Facilitated discussion topics included:
  - General health and menopause experience
  - VVA awareness and knowledge
  - Impact of dyspareunia (physical, emotional, quality of life)
  - Treatment experience (OTC and Rx)
  - Barriers to treatments

Results

Participants

- Participants (n=38) had a mean age of 63 years (range 49 to 74), with 74% being at least 60 years of age
- The majority were Caucasian (84%) and had at least a college degree (52%)

VVA is a Devastating Condition

- Dyspareunia and vaginal dryness as a way of admitting to sexual problems with partner
- Women use “pain” as the symptom to be treated
- Women use “dryness” as a way of admitting to sexual problems with partner

Consequences: Emotional Pain, Low Self-Esteem, and Damaged Relationships

- Women consistently point to both physical and emotional pain as a result of VVA
- Generalized sadness and guilt are common
- It’s just really sad. You don’t touch, you can’t be close or physical…you can’t get loving or kindness when you most need it
- I had to deal with that. I’m so guthless, he doesn’t deserve this.

Self-esteem is lowered in…relationships damaged

- This just sucks. I feel like a failure
- We’re still young. We want to be young.
- You just feel so old…dried-up
- God I wanted this…when it’s missing, it is just not right
- He sleeps in the recliner…he’s afraid to confront me

Many Women Suffer in Silence...

- I’m not ready to give up
- We are not our mothers or grandmothers
- I usually face my problems and solve them… I won’t accept this

VIA Discussion with HCPs

How women broach the topic with their HCPs

- Women use “dryness” as a way of admitting to sexual problems with partner
- Women use “pain” as the symptom to be treated
- Some have no problem discussing sexual issues; others are uncomfortable
- Many have little knowledge concerning how pain relates to vaginal changes

Many Women Do or Don’t Seek Treatment

Treatment Issues

- Women felt that few treatment options were discussed with them
- Over-the-counter (OTC) products
- Helped with milder symptoms
- Different with moderate to severe pain
- Many women still try new OTC products regardless of previous failures
- Barriers to Rx treatment
- Lack of knowledge of current products (ie, local vs systemic)
- Fear of estrogen
- Treatment characteristics (cost, lack of spontaneity, messy/inconvenient, involves pain or injury with an applicator)

Conclusions

- There is a large, highly motivated patient population demanding solutions to the problem of post-menopausal pain with intercourse and its underlying VVA condition.
- Many of the non-treating women do not understand VVA causes and are not motivated to take action to find help; however, when they do ask for help, they are not being heard by practitioners.
- The consequences of not treating are great. Women suffer from significant pain, loss of sexual function, emotional trauma, lower self-esteem, and damage to marital and partner relationships.
- Barriers to Rx treatment include lack of knowledge of current products, fear of estrogen, and treatment characteristics.

References


Disclosures

S.K. is a consultant for TherapeuticsMD, Hivos Nortina, Pfizer, Strategic Science and Technology, Paleos, Emotional Brain, Sprout Pharmaceuticals, Valeant Pharmaceuticals, and Sermonix Pharmaceuticals, A.J. and S.U. are members of TherapeuticsMD. TherapeuticsMD supported the medical writing assistance provided by Demetria Vietani, PhD; Precise Publications, LLC.