

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

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Introduction

- Vulvar and vaginal atrophy (VVA), a component of genitourinary syndrome of menopause (GSM),¹ is prevalent and bothersome in postmenopausal women
- Recent estimates suggest that up to 32 million women may be experiencing symptomatic VVA²
 - 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 life³⁻⁵

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 Feb to Mar, 2015.
- Groups (n=6) 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

A "Perfect Storm" of health and life issues leading to increased suffering by women in post-menopausal years

- Painful physical symptoms
- Emotional trauma
- Problems with relationships
- Quality of life

Pain With Intercourse (Dyspareunia) Can Be Significant

Pain can be excruciating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt like someone was stabbing me with a knife. I couldn't breathe • Way more than bothersome...this is severe pain, this is defeating, this is life changing, this has no end in sight...in this day and age there should be a solution • It's sharp...on a 10-point scale, a "10" • Tried to explain to my husband...imagine someone with a baseball bat ramming it into you
Sensitivity and pain can be enduring and impact lifestyle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soreness lasts days afterward • Skin feels irritated or sore...urination becomes painful • Unable to exercise, uncomfortable jogging or riding a bicycle • Can't get down on floor and play with grandkids

Pain Leads to Loss of Sexual Function

Spontaneity and pleasure are gone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anything this painful cannot be fun • I was sexually active...now it's an effort • You have to carefully plan...nurture the opportunity
The experience of sex itself is frustrating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five seconds into having sex I cry out...can't go on • You tolerate as much as you can • Pain just shoots through me...I have to get up
Intercourse is much less frequent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have not had sex in 7 years • I adore my husband. It's just too hard...it hurts too much • Not in months...I try in other ways
Sex and intimacy are shut out of relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have a new relationship but I can't take it to the next step. We just put that on hold. • I can't touch or kiss anymore...it would just lead to other things • If you're not having sex, it doesn't bother you

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

Women consistently point to both physical and emotional pain as a result of VVA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The pain is a "7" on the physical side... a "10" on the emotional • I'm able to tolerate the physical... not the emotional
Generalized sadness and guilt are common	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 dread going to bed. I'm so guilt-ridden. He doesn't deserve this.
Self-esteem is lowered and relationships damaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 intended 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...

The pain and loss of sex is not a topic for "polite conversation". It's too personal, embarrassing, sensitive, or threatening.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No one talks about...it's embarrassing...friends look at you like what's wrong with you • Can't talk with family, not even my sister
Women turn to complacency and an uncomfortable silence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You get old...you accept it and put it behind you • Life comes in stages. You have to just deal with it...
Rationalization helps them cope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women push through pain their whole lives...it's who we are • Having atrophy won't kill you

...But Not All

"Generational tug" of young, strong, independent women directly against age and the fears of being old, dependent, and sick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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
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VVA 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
- Women have little knowledge concerning how pain relates to vaginal changes

Most HCPs did not initiate the discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doctor didn't raise the problem...I did...pain with sex
Often met with less than sensitive response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My GYN is a baby...she doesn't understand • Doctors kind of blow you off
"Atrophy" is mentioned – Not something patient wants to hear or even think about	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had to look it up in the dictionary... it means "withering or wasting away" • Doctor said it was a common problem... just getting old
Few treatment options are discussed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basically, there are moisturizers/lubricants and then there is estrogen • He said...here, try this...and told me little about what it would do for me
Some women simply do not accept the treatments discussed and actively seek out other options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I left the doctor that didn't treat • I went and did a lot of research... went to a talk on treatment and found the URO/GYN that is now my doctor

Attitudes to Treatment Are Very Different Between Rx Users & Non-Users	
Rx Users: Empowered	Rx Non-Users: Complacent
 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize physical and emotional benefits of estrogen • Strong anti-aging beliefs (fight to stay young; reverse aging) • Search out medical advice (switch doctors; demand Rx) • Empowered personality • Optimistic and sexually active 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accept aging and symptoms as inevitable • Less likely to talk with doctor, embarrassed • Lack of knowledge, fears and confusion dominate thinking • Depressed about the future • Not in an active sexual relationship

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

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Disclosures

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