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## Patient information

# Vaginismus

## Introduction

Vaginismus is a common condition that can make penetration of the vagina difficult, uncomfortable, painful and/or impossible. Vaginismus describes an involuntary reflex spasm and contraction of the pelvic floor muscles around the entrance to the vagina. These muscle spasms can be strong enough to prevent penetration from happening and/or cause pain and discomfort.

Vaginismus can affect penetrative sex. Women with vaginismus may find penetrative sex impossible. If they can experience penetration, then it may be with considerable pain or discomfort. Vaginismus can also make smear tests difficult or impossible. Vaginismus can even be triggered by an anticipation of anything entering or being close to the vaginal opening.

Some women experience vaginismus when they first attempt to put anything inside their vagina. Other women find that it develops later in life, even after periods of pain free penetration.



## What causes vaginismus?

Vaginismus can develop due to a number of different biological, psychological and social/cultural factors. There is rarely a singular “cause”. Penetration may initially be painful due to a physical condition, such as an infection, recurrent thrush or a skin condition. These conditions may cause vaginismus to develop over time. Vaginismus may also develop due to fears and worries about sex. Many women grow up believing that sex will be painful or uncomfortable. Some may be afraid about becoming pregnant or getting a sexually transmitted infection. For some women, their fears or worries may have their origins in a difficult sexual experience, such as unwanted sex or a sexual assault. For many women, social and cultural messages about sex can also be implicated in the development of vaginismus, and may also make it difficult to talk about.

It is important to consult with your medical doctor to make sure there is no medical reason (such as infection) for penetration to cause discomfort or pain.

## Why does the pain persist?

Many women find that vaginismus can persist for a significant period of time, even when their conscious mind wants to engage in penetration. The muscles involved in the maintenance of vaginismus are a reflex response. This means they respond automatically and are not under our conscious control.

If there are any thoughts, fears or worries about penetration, the body responds to this by automatically contracting the pelvic floor muscles. This muscle reflex is a natural protective response to any anticipated discomfort or pain (similar to blinking to protect your eyes). If penetration is then attempted, it is likely to be more difficult due to these contracted muscles. Additionally in a sexual situation, the anticipation of pain can interrupt the arousal process, meaning the body is less prepared and ready for penetration. Over time, this anticipation of pain or discomfort can cause an unhelpful cycle to develop. Anticipation of future pain increases the likelihood that future penetration will be uncomfortable, unpleasant or painful. For

many women, this can have an impact on their enjoyment of and desire for sex.

## What can help with vaginismus?

If penetrative sex of any kind is painful or uncomfortable, it is usually recommended to stop attempting penetration whilst you work on strategies for overcoming vaginismus. This is because repeated attempts at penetration that are difficult or painful serve to strengthen the association your mind makes between penetration and pain. It is important to begin to create new, more positive associations with sex. If you have a regular sexual partner, you may wish to speak with this person about it, or show them this leaflet.

Treatment for vaginismus involves learning more about the condition and the symptoms you may be experiencing. Understanding your body, what helps you to become aroused and the changes that take place during arousal are an important step [[link to leaflet on understanding arousal and orgasm](#)]. Learning relaxation techniques, developing more awareness and control over the pelvic floor muscles through diaphragmatic breathing and kegel exercises are usually very helpful.

Beginning to re-introduce penetration through a set of graded exercises is an important part of overcoming vaginismus. These exercises help you to increase your awareness of your body and its responses. They also help to retrain your mind and pelvic floor muscles to respond in a different way to something entering the vagina. Practising these exercises regularly over time can help to reduce the pain as well as the physical and emotional discomfort associated with penetration.

The graded homework exercises involve practicing ways of relaxing your muscles while inserting different sized vaginal trainers (or using tampons and fingers to a similar effect). Starting small and then slowly building this up over several weeks is usually a successful way of achieving success. Most women with vaginismus have a high rate of success with this treatment.