

# Topical Estrogen

## What You Should Know



Women who have gone through menopause often have vaginal dryness. This problem is also common in those who have had both of their ovaries surgically removed. In some cases, vaginal dryness can lead to pain with sex, burning vaginal discomfort or itching, recurrent urinary tract infections (UTIs) or abnormal vaginal discharge. Vaginal dryness may also lead to frequent or painful urination. These symptoms can lead women to avoid sex. Topical estrogen is a prescription treatment that can help lower or ease these symptoms.

### What Causes Vaginal Dryness?

The hormone estrogen helps keep the vagina moist. Estrogen maintains thickness of the vaginal lining and keeps the tissue flexible. Estrogen maintains the vagina's acidity, which helps to prevent UTIs. During menopause, the body's level of estrogen goes down. This can cause vaginal dryness. It can also be caused by:

- Surgical removal of the ovaries
- Chemotherapy
- Radiation therapy of the pelvis to treat cancer
- Breastfeeding (estrogen returns to normal levels when breastfeeding happens less often or is stopped)

### What is the Treatment for Vaginal Dryness?

There are many over-the-counter treatments for vaginal dryness. These involve moisturizers and lubricants. Prescription treatments include a vaginal estrogen cream, or insertable tablet, capsule or ring. These treatments work as long as you use the treatment. Your symptoms will return when you stop.

Using topical estrogen can ease or lessen:

- Dryness and soreness in the vagina
- Itching, redness or soreness of the vulva (the outer part of the female sexual organs)
- Feeling an urge to urinate often or having pain while urinating
- Pain during sex
- Frequency of urinary tract infections

### Is Topical Estrogen Safe?

Very low doses of estrogen can be used to treat vaginal dryness when it is used as a cream or an insertable tablet, capsule or ring. A small amount of the hormone is absorbed in the bloodstream. When used on a regular basis, the level of estrogen in the blood is similar to the level in postmenopausal women who are not using topical estrogen. That means there is a much lower risk of side effects such as blood clots, breast cancer and heart attack, compared with other products that have estrogen, such as hormone therapy or birth control pills. If you have a history of breast cancer, talk with your doctor about the risks and benefits of vaginal estrogen. Using topical estrogen will not protect against osteoporosis or stop hot flashes caused by menopause.

### How Do I Use Vaginal Estrogen?

**Cream:** Using the cream at bedtime will help the cream leak less. A tube of the estrogen comes with an applicator and details on how to use it. You squeeze the estrogen cream into the applicator and place it into your vagina. You can also use your fingertip to apply it. Your doctor will tell you how often to use the cream. Often, women use the cream every night for two weeks, then two to three times a week.

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Many women use the cream for years with no side effects.

**Tablet or capsule:** The tablet or capsule comes in a one-time use applicator. Your doctor will tell you how often to use it. Often, women place a tablet or capsule every night for two weeks and then twice a week after that.

**Ring:** The flexible plastic ring is left in the vagina for three months. After three months, the old ring is removed and a new one is put in its place. It does not need to be removed during sex or bathing. It cannot be felt by you or your sexual partner. In women who have had a hysterectomy, the ring will sometimes fall out.

Treatments often help with dryness within a few weeks but can take up to 3 months of consistent use, so it is of great value to keep using to see results.

### About the Urology Care Foundation

The Urology Care Foundation is the world's leading urologic foundation – and the official foundation of the American Urological Association. We provide information for those actively managing their urologic health and those ready to make health changes. Our information is based on the American Urological Association resources and is reviewed by medical experts. To learn more, visit the Urology Care Foundation's website, **UrologyHealth.org/UrologicConditions** or go to **UrologyHealth.org/FindAUrologist** to find a doctor near you.

### Disclaimer

This information is not a tool for self-diagnosis or a substitute for professional medical advice. It is not to be used or relied on for that purpose. Please talk to your urologist or health care provider about your health concerns. Always talk to a health care provider before you start or stop any treatments, including medications. For more information, visit **UrologyHealth.org/Download** or call 800-828-7866.