Summary

Vulvar cancer is a type of cancer that affects the vulvar region. It is most commonly diagnosed in older women aged around 70 years or over. The incidence of vulvar cancer in younger women between the age of 35 and 45 is increasing. Symptoms of vulvar cancer include an ulcer that refuses to heal and unusual bleeding or discharge from the vagina.

Risk factors for vulvar cancer

Some of the risk factors for vulvar cancer include:

- age – vulvar cancer usually occurs in postmenopausal women, but there appears to be an increasing number of young women being diagnosed
- sexually transmitted infections
- multiple sex partners
- lichen sclerosus (a common skin condition that usually occurs around the vulva and anus).
- smoking
- never having children (nulliparity)
- chronic vulvar itching (pruritis)
- genital warts (human papilloma virus infection)
- vulval intraepithelial neoplasia (a pre-cancerous condition)
- prior history of squamous cell cancer of the cervix
- prior history of squamous cell cancer of the vagina.

Vulval intraepithelial neoplasia and vulvar cancer

Vulval intraepithelial neoplasia (VIN) is a pre-cancerous condition of the vulva. It is uncommon, but appears to have a high risk of becoming cancerous if untreated. Of those women who are treated, 5 to 10 per cent may still develop vulvar cancer.

Types of vulvar cancer

Vulvar cancer is classified according to its cell of origin. This can include:

- squamous cell carcinoma – originating in the skin cells. This type accounts for about 90 per cent of cases
- melanoma – originating in the pigment cells deeper in the skin. This type accounts for about five per cent of cases (in the vulva it is not related to sun exposure)
- adenosquamous – originating from the Bartholin’s glands, the structures that supply lubricant to the genitals. This type accounts for less than one per cent of cases
- sarcoma – originating from supporting cells. This type is quite rare
- lymphoma – originating from the immune cells. This type is quite rare
basal carcinoma – a form of skin cancer. This type is quite rare.

**Diagnosis of vulvar cancer**

Some of the methods for diagnosing vulvar cancer include:

- taking a medical history
- a physical examination
- examination of the vulva with a colposcope (a small microscope), which makes it easier to see the lesions of certain diseases (including VIN and vulvar cancer)
- taking a biopsy of the sore or lump using a scalpel (with local anaesthesia), or performing a punch biopsy (this instrument extracts a little core sample)
- excising (removing) some tissue under general anaesthetic.

**Treatment for vulvar cancer**

Treatment for vulvar cancer can include

- **vulvectomy** – the first line of treatment is to surgically remove the tumour. Depending on factors including the location, type, stage and severity of the cancer, surgery may include radical vulvectomy (removal of the vulva), with or without removal of the groin lymph nodes from one or both sides. The clitoris may or may not need to be removed
- **radiation therapy** – the use of precisely targeted x-rays to kill cancer cells. This may be used as the primary treatment to avoid removal of the clitoris
- **chemotherapy** – the use of cancer-killing drugs, often in combination with radiotherapy. Chemotherapy can be helpful in controlling secondary cancers because it treats the whole body. It may also be used with radiation to increase the effectiveness of radiotherapy.

**When a cure for vulvar cancer isn’t possible**

If vulvar cancer has been diagnosed in its later stages, the cancer may have spread to the point where a cure is no longer possible. Treatment then focuses on improving quality of life by relieving the symptoms. This is called **palliative treatment**.

**Reducing the risk of vulvar cancer**

It is possible to reduce the risk of vulvar cancer by avoiding known risk factors.

The most significant risk reduction strategy is to avoid sexually transmissible infections (STIs). This is because some STIs (such as herpes and human papillomavirus, including genital warts) cause changes to the cells of the cervix. Women who have previously experienced changes to the cells of their cervix are at increased risk of developing VIN, which is the precursor of (comes before) vulvar cancer.

Other risk reduction strategies include:

- Don’t smoke.
- Don’t dismiss chronic vulvar itching as a persistent thrush infection.
- Don’t treat a vaginal itch with over-the-counter preparations – see your doctor for tests.
- Have regular gynaecological check-ups.
- If you think you may be at increased risk of vulvar cancer, ask your GP to show you how to perform a self-examination.

**Where to get help**

- Your GP
- Women’s health clinic
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100 or 1800 013 952
- Cancer Council Victoria Tel. 13 11 20

**References**

- Can vulvar cancer be found early? 2017, American Cancer Society.
- Vulvar cancer – early detection, diagnosis and staging, 2017, American Cancer Society.

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More information

Cancer

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- A-Z of cancer conditions
- Cancer explained
- Cancer risk factors
- Screening and early detection
- Cancer treatments
- Living with cancer
A-Z of cancer conditions

- **Bladder cancer**
  Bladder cancer affects twice as many men as women.

- **Bone cancer**
  Bone cancer is a rare form of cancer that is treated with chemotherapy, radiotherapy or hormone therapy.

- **Bowel cancer**
  Bowel cancer is highly curable if found at an early stage.

- **Brain tumours - cancer**
  Brain cancer symptoms and treatment depend on which part of the brain is affected.

- **Brain tumours - gliomas**
  Gliomas are brain tumours associated with the three types of glial cell in the brain.

- **Breast cancer**
  Breast cancer is the most common cancer in Australian women.

- **Breast Cancer - Early Diagnosis (video)**
  Being diagnosed with breast cancer can be overwhelming. Women, their partners and families need support to cope with the emotional impact of the illness on their daily lives. In this video clip...

- **Cervical cancer**
  All women aged between 25 and 74 are advised to have Cervical Screening Tests every 5 years, new tests help identify HPV or cervical cancer.

- **Fallopian tube cancer**
  Fallopian tube cancer is one of the rarest gynaecological cancers.

- **Kidney cancer**
  Most kidney cancers are found when the doctor is checking for something else.

- **Leukaemia**
  Most children and many adults with acute leukaemia can expect to be cured, while chronic leukaemia can be successfully managed.

- **Liver cancer**
  Liver cancer can be a primary cancer that starts in the liver, or a secondary cancer that starts in another part of the body and spreads to the liver.

- **Living with Bowel Cancer - Treatment and Surgery (video)**
  Participants discuss their surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Each persons situation is different as were their treatment options. Participants share some of the side effects and also their...

- **Lung cancer**
  Lung cancer occurs most often in adults between the ages of 40 and 70 who have smoked cigarettes for at least 20 years.

- **Lymphoma**
  Lymphoma is a general term for a cancer that begins in the lymphatic system.

- **Melanoma**
  If untreated, melanomas can spread to other parts of the body and may be fatal.

- **Mesotheiloma**
  Mesotheiloma is a rare type of cancer that can develop decades after exposure to asbestos.

- **Molar pregnancy**
  Most molar pregnancies are diagnosed when bleeding early in pregnancy prompts an ultrasound scan.

- **Multiple myeloma**
  Multiple myeloma is cancer of plasma cells in the bone marrow.

- **Ovarian cancer**

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Many women with early stage ovarian cancer may not have any symptoms...

- **Pancreatic cancer**
  The causes of pancreatic cancer are unknown, but smokers are at greater risk...

- **Pituitary tumour**
  Generally, pituitary tumours are benign and slow growing, and pituitary cancers are extremely rare...

- **Prostate cancer**
  Prostate cancer can be treated in a variety of ways, so discuss treatment options with your doctor...

- **Prostate Cancer - Diagnosis (video)**
  In this video clip, participants discuss the events that led to them being tested for prostate cancer, whether that was regular PSA testing or in response to a GP recommendation...

- **Rectal cancer**
  If treated in its earliest stages, rectal cancer is highly curable...

- **Skin cancer**
  Check all of your skin, not just sun-exposed areas. If you notice anything unusual, including any change in shape, colour or size of a spot, or the development of a spot, visit your doctor as soon as...

- **Skin cancer - children**
  Encourage your child to be SunSmart ? whatever their age...

- **Stomach cancer**
  The symptoms of stomach cancer are usually vague and can be common to other medical conditions...

- **Testicular cancer**
  Early diagnosis and treatment can cure almost all cases of testicular cancer...

- **Throat cancer**
  Risk factors for throat cancer include smoking and heavy alcohol consumption...

- **Thyroid cancer**
  Anyone can develop thyroid cancer, regardless of age or gender...

- **Uterine cancer**
  Uterine cancer is one of the most common gynaecological cancers...

- **Vaginal cancer**
  Some vaginal cancers have no symptoms in their early stages, and only cause symptoms once they have invaded other parts of the body...

- **Vulvar cancer**
  In its early stages, vulvar cancer often has no symptoms because the cancer is so tiny...

**Cancer explained**

- **Breast Cancer - Early Diagnosis (video)**
  Being diagnosed with breast cancer can be overwhelming. Women, their partners and families need support to cope with the emotional impact of the illness on their daily lives. In this video clip...

- **Cancer Council Victoria**
  Cancer Council Victoria aims to reduce the impact of all cancers for all Victorians...

- **Cancer explained**
  There are about 200 different types of cancer and most areas of the body can be affected...

- **Living with Bowel Cancer - Treatment and Surgery (video)**
  Participants discuss their surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Each person’s situation is different as were their treatment options. Participants share some of the side effects and also their...

- **Prostate Cancer - Diagnosis (video)**
In this video clip, participants discuss the events that led to them being tested for prostate cancer, whether that was regular PSA testing or in response to a GP recommendation.

Cancer risk factors

- Breast Cancer - Early Diagnosis (video)
  Being diagnosed with breast cancer can be overwhelming. Women, their partners and families need support to cope with the emotional impact of the illness on their daily lives. In this video clip.

- Cancer and asbestos
  Long-term exposure to asbestos is a cause of lung cancer and other serious illnesses.

- Cancer and food
  Diet can influence your risk of developing some cancers, but there is no evidence that specific foods can cause or cure cancer.

- Cancer and heredity
  Latest research suggests that most cancers are caused by environmental rather than genetic factors.

- Disease clusters
  Disease clusters are rare but can cause community concern about the possible effects of exposure to environmental hazards.

- Prostate Cancer - Diagnosis (video)
  In this video clip, participants discuss the events that led to them being tested for prostate cancer, whether that was regular PSA testing or in response to a GP recommendation.

- Skin cancer - protecting outdoor workers
  People who work outdoors are in one of the highest risk groups for skin cancer.

- Skin cancer - risk factors
  The major cause of skin cancer is over exposure to ultraviolet radiation from the sun or other sources, such as solariums.

- Skin cancer - tanning
  A suntan is a sign of skin damage; there is no such thing as a 'safe' tan.

- Smoking kills
  Tobacco causes more illness and death than any other drug.

Screening and early detection

- Biopsy
  Before a biopsy, you need to discuss a range of issues with your doctor or surgeon.

- Bowel cancer screening
  The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBCSP) offers kits for free to Australians between the ages of 50 and 74 years of age.

- Breast Cancer - Early Diagnosis (video)
  Being diagnosed with breast cancer can be overwhelming. Women, their partners and families need support to cope with the emotional impact of the illness on their daily lives. In this video clip.

- Breast screening
  A breast x-ray or mammogram every two years is recommended for women aged 50 to 69.

- Cancer screening
  The aim of cancer screening is to find cancer in its early stages.

- Cervical screening tests
  The cervical screening test protects up to 30 per cent more women than the PAP test.

- Genetic testing for inherited cancer
  A predisposition to certain cancers can be inherited via altered genes.

- Living with Bowel Cancer - Treatment and Surgery (video)
  Participants discuss their surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Each person's situation is different as are their treatment options. Participants share some of
the side effects and also their...

- **Prostate Cancer - Diagnosis (video)**
  
  In this video clip, participants discuss the events that led to them being tested for prostate cancer, whether that was regular PSA testing or in response to a GP recommendation...

- **Prostate cancer testing**
  
  Men with a family history of prostate cancer, or men who have had a raised test result in the past, will benefit most from regular testing...

### Cancer treatments

- **Breast cancer and oestrogen**
  
  There are different types of breast cancer, and around 70 per cent are sensitive to the female sex hormone oestrogen...

- **Breast Cancer - Early Diagnosis (video)**
  
  Being diagnosed with breast cancer can be overwhelming. Women, their partners and families need support to cope with the emotional impact of the illness on their daily lives. In this video clip...

- **Cancer pain management**
  
  A person with cancer who obtains pain relief is likely to sleep better and have more energy during the day...

- **Cancer treatments - chemotherapy**
  
  Chemotherapy is the use of drugs to destroy cancer cells...

- **Cancer treatments - radiotherapy**
  
  Radiotherapy uses precisely targeted x-rays to destroy cancer cells while reducing the impact of radiation on healthy cells...

- **Prostate cancer - androgen deprivation therapy**
  
  One of the treatments for prostate cancer is androgen deprivation therapy (previously called hormone therapy)...

- **Prostate Cancer - Diagnosis (video)**
  
  In this video clip, participants discuss the events that led to them being tested for prostate cancer, whether that was regular PSA testing or in response to a GP recommendation...

- **Proctectomy - for cancer**
  
  The aim of a radical prostatectomy is to remove the cancer before it spreads to other parts of the body...

### Living with cancer

- **Breast Cancer - Early Diagnosis (video)**
  
  Being diagnosed with breast cancer can be overwhelming. Women, their partners and families need support to cope with the emotional impact of the illness on their daily lives. In this video clip...

- **Cancer and malnutrition**
  
  It is important for the health of people with cancer to eat well before, during and after cancer treatment...

- **Cancer - exercise to help you cope**
  
  People with cancer should be as physically active as their abilities and condition allow...

- **Cancer pain management**
  
  A person with cancer who obtains pain relief is likely to sleep better and have more energy during the day...

- **Living with Bowel Cancer - Treatment and Surgery (video)**
  
  Participants discuss their surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. Each persons situation is different as were their treatment options. Participants share some of the side effects and also their...
Lymphoedema

Women who have undergone treatment of breast cancer are particularly susceptible to lymphoedema of the arm.

Prostate Cancer - Diagnosis (video)

In this video clip, participants discuss the events that led to them being tested for prostate cancer, whether that was regular PSA testing or in response to a GP recommendation.

Related Information

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- Ovarian cancer
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Home

Related information on other websites

- Australian Society of Gynaecological Oncologists.
- The cervical cancer vaccine.

Support Groups

- GAIN - Gynaecological Awareness Information Network

Content Partner

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