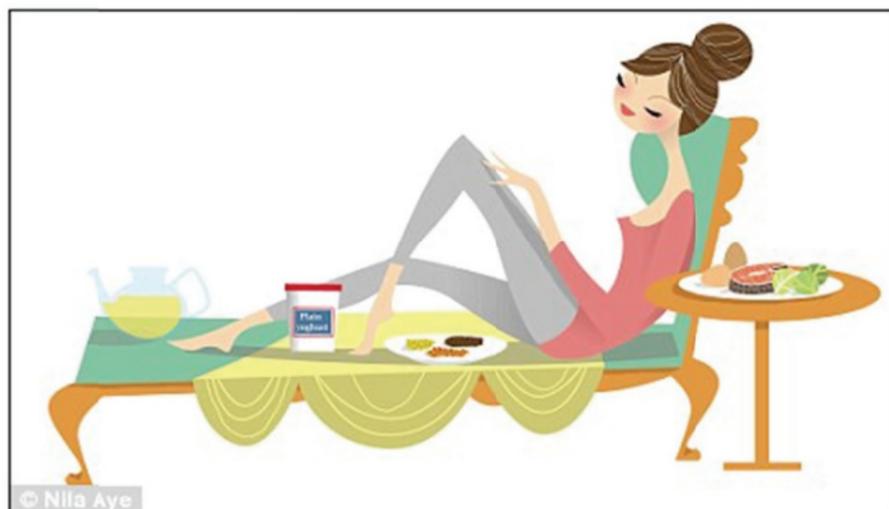


Health notes: Don't get left high and dry

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Vaginal dryness (aka atrophy) can affect women of all ages, but it's very common during and after the menopause. 'It is perhaps the most distressing and least talked about symptom of the menopause,' says Marilyn Glenville, author of *The Natural Health Bible for Women* and a registered nutritionist (marilynglenville.com). 'The vagina feels dry, itchy and at times tender,' she explains. 'It may take longer to become lubricated during lovemaking, so intercourse feels uncomfortable, even painful, and may lead to bleeding. You may also develop a vaginal infection, which itself compounds the problem.'

The main cause in menopausal women is loss of oestrogen, which usually acts on the mucus membranes at the mouth of the uterus to produce a lubricant that keeps the vagina moist and protects against infection. Low oestrogen also causes the vagina and surrounding connective tissue to lose elasticity and the tissue that lines the vagina to become thinner and more fragile. Stress and fatigue add to the problem.

Your doctor may suggest HRT or an oestrogen cream or pessary to use vaginally. There is also an effective natural approach which Marilyn Glenville outlines here.

- A low or no-fat diet makes your whole body drier, including the vagina. Eat plenty of omega-3 essential fatty acids (found mainly in oily fish, nuts, seeds and green veg) and also supplement with fish oil (see below). Also consume foods rich in phytoestrogens (such as soya, chickpeas, lentils and flaxseeds) which change the cells of the vagina so they become softer and more elastic. Eating plain live organic yoghurt five times a week helps maintain healthy intestinal flora and vaginal balance.
- Daily Omega-3 fish oils help your whole body including hormone balance (also skin, hair and nails, and state of mind). Look for a product with 700mg EPA and 500mg DHA per dose, such as Omega 3 Plus by Natural Health Practice (NHP), £22.97 for 60 capsules; take one capsule twice daily. From Victoria Health, tel: 0800 3898 195; victoriahealth.com.
- Vitamin C is essential for healthy collagen which gives tissue elasticity. You need 500mg twice daily – try Vitamin C Plus by NHP, £12.77 for 60 capsules.
- Take a multivitamin formulated for women, with anti-ageing antioxidants including vitamin E (shown to help with vaginal dryness), selenium and zinc. Try MenoPlus by NHP, £20.97 for 60 capsules; take 2-3 capsules daily.
- Drink six to eight glasses of water or herbal tea daily to keep all your tissues hydrated and plumped up; without water tissue dries up and can crack.
- Exercise daily to keep your vagina supple and lubricated. Aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise five to six times a week. Also practise Kegel pelvic exercises regularly to help strengthen your muscles, making sex more enjoyable (as well as preventing stress incontinence). Talk to your GP/practice nurse and also look at kegalexercisesforwomen.com.
- Have more sex! Women who have sex once or twice a week with plenty of foreplay (and/or masturbate) tend to lubricate more rapidly when aroused. A good quality, natural lubricant may help too, such as Yes Organic Lubricant (available as an oil-based or water-based version), £9.98 for 75ml.
- Avoid douches, talcum powder, hot baths, fragranced lavatory paper, wipes, bath oils and foams as they can irritate the vagina. And don't wash your vagina with soap as this will dry out the skin: it's self-cleansing and warm water is generally all you need.