



It's been a year since my last period and sex is so painful my partner and I have nearly given up. My doctor isn't very helpful. What can I do?

Your problem is most likely due to vaginal atrophy (VA), which means the thinning and inflammation of the vaginal wall caused by a drop in oestrogen levels. Up to 45 per cent of postmenopausal women suffer from VA, according to a recent large-scale multinational study. It also found that 70 per cent of British women with VA avoided intimacy and over half said it had put them off sex altogether. Although it is so common, many women simply don't know about VA and how it can be treated.

Symptoms of VA include vaginal dryness, soreness, itching and painful intercourse. 'This is a huge problem that causes so much distress,' says consultant gynaecologist Michael Dooley (thepoundburyclinic.co.uk). 'The severe discomfort with intercourse can cause relationship problems.'

VA is also a common cause of postmenopausal bleeding, but this should be investigated as, in rare instances, it may be the first sign of uterine cancer.

An accurate diagnosis is essential. Some women and even doctors think the problem is due to thrush or lichen sclerosus (a vulval skin disorder, which causes itching and soreness).

Effective treatment is available 'Local oestrogen can make all the difference to a woman's sex life,' says Mr Dooley. After testing to exclude candida or bacterial infection, he prescribes a course of Vagifem, a vaginal tablet that releases a low dose of oestradiol into the vagina to rejuvenate it. (HRT can help if women are happy to take it.) Many women then only need to use local oestrogen (under medical supervision) twice a week, and some just need a lubricant. A reader emailed recently recommending Yes organic lubricant, £10.30, from Victoria Health (tel: 0800 3898 195, victoriahealth.com). Sex is good for the vagina because it helps keep the muscles in shape.

Other treatments may help. Another reader, now 60, who had VA in her early 50s and had given up sex, found that taking a product containing Peruvian maca, plus a new partner and regular sex, had reversed the condition. Maca (Lepidium meyenii) has been associated with improving fertility and sexual problems for centuries and some studies support this. Although experts agree that, on the basis of 2,000 years of traditional use, maca is probably safe, it is vital to check with your doctor first and take a good-quality supplement. Femergy by Better You contains Peruvian maca, Brazilian ginseng and ginkgo biloba, £10.25 for 60 vegicaps (from Victoria Health, as above).