

SaferSex4Seniors

Information you need to enjoy safer sexual pleasure!

A Doctor's Take on Lubricants for Female Pleasure and Comfort

The best way to keep your vulva – the area around the opening to your vagina – as well as your vagina healthy is by having regular sex play, with a partner, or just with yourself. Sex play keeps the blood supply healthy in that area and keeps your tissues pliable (stretchy). The old adage “use it or lose it” definitely applies! Personal lubricants can make sex play more comfortable, sensual and satisfying.

Q. Ever since I reached menopause, I have experienced vaginal dryness. Will anything help?

This is a very common problem. Before menopause, women produce the hormones estrogen and progesterone, which are very important for vaginal health. After menopause, the lack of those hormones causes dryness. An important question: is the dryness a daily comfort issue or only a problem during sexual play?

If daily dryness is the problem, try K-Y Liquibeads (silicone-based) and Replens (glycerin-based). You can even use solid vegetable shortening, like Crisco, or olive oil (no need to waste money on extra virgin!) If you're uncomfortable only during sex play, sample over-the-counter lubricants to see which kinds you like best. See the list below for information about the types of lubricants available.

Q. What should I look for in a lubricant?

Different kinds of relationships and different types of sex play call for different lubricants.

If you are only having sex with one person, and you are willing to trust that the one person is only having sex with you, and both of you are free of sexually transmitted infections, then you can use all the kinds of lubricants I've listed below:

- Petroleum-based (including Vaseline): These are cheap and easy to find; however, I do not recommend them as they can irritate the vulva and cannot be used with condoms because petroleum breaks down the latex.
- Natural oils (olive, corn etc): I love these oil-based lubricants, but they should not be used with condom because, like petroleum products, natural oils can break down latex.
- Water-based without glycerin: These may be best for women with very sensitive skin and are safe to use with condoms; however, they have a bitter taste and do not last as long during sex play as do non-water based lubricants.
- Water-based with glycerin: These have the benefits of water-based without glycerin but without the bitter taste. The down side is that they do not last very long during sex play and can become sticky. Although no scientific study proves this, some women report that the non-vegetable based glycerin triggers yeast infections.
- Silicone-based: These are my favorites. They last 3 times longer than water-based lubes and are safe to use with condoms. Negatives include that they can stain sheets, and they cannot be used with toys that contain silicone.
- Flavored lubricants: With additives to make them taste like strawberry, cherry, etc., flavored lubricants are designed for use during oral sex. Due to their preservatives and flavorings, they are best reserved for that use rather than for anal or vaginal sex.

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If you are in a new relationship, a relationship with someone you don't know so well, or have any concerns that this partner could have a sexually transmitted infection, you need to use condoms. It is very important that you only use a lubricant that is safe for use with condoms. Do not use the first two types of lubricants listed above – petroleum-based, like Vaseline, or any lubricant made of natural oils, including vegetable oils or Crisco – because petroleum products and natural oils can break down latex and make the condom ineffective.

Q. Where can I buy a personal lubricant?

Most of the lubricants described above can be found at your local pharmacy or grocery store. Read the labels very carefully, and avoid anything that claims to be a “warming” or “arousal” product without consulting your doctor. I have seen many allergic reactions to such products, which can burn rather than warm! Alternatively, you can go on an outing with your friends and visit a local “adult” store. If you need more privacy, you can buy products online, but get product recommendations from your doctor or a sexual health educator.

Q. I've tried all kinds of lubricants and nothing works. My vulva is dry and uncomfortable all the time and sex really hurts. What can I do?

Although some women get sufficient comfort from non-prescription lubricants, many women need more help and find topical estrogen to be a good solution. The amount of estrogen needed to protect the vulva and keep the tissues healthy is very small, and this does not fall into the category of hormone replacement therapy. Most of my patients get excellent results by using a pea-sized amount of either an estrogen-alone cream or a compounded estrogen/testosterone cream once or twice a day. The amount of hormones absorbed into the bloodstream from this amount is minute, but the results are amazing. I call it “face cream for the vulva”. Many of my patients who are survivors of estrogen receptor-positive cancers are able to use this small amount; however, the decision to use this treatment is made only in consultation with each patient's oncologist.

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