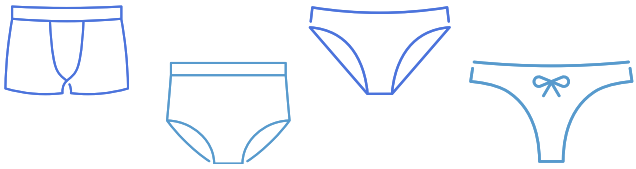
fact sheet

Genital Skin Care



Genital skin is the skin on and around the vulva/vagina, penis and anus. It is delicate skin and taking care of it is important to avoid irritation.

How should I wash genital skin?

- Genital skin is sensitive and only needs gentle washing with warm water. If your skin is particularly dry, and aqueous cream or pH balanced wash made for sensitive skin, such as QV, Cetaphil, Aveeno or Dermaveen is ideal. A sensitive moisturising ointment such as dermeze or vaseline applied after washing can help protect the skin.

Never use these products inside the vagina or anus – warm water only should be used in these areas.

- Avoid soaps, body wash, wipes, sprays, etc. Even hypoallergenic, sensitive, and so-called 'natural' products can cause irritation.
- Aim for shorter cooler showers and baths as hot water can dry out the skin. Once a day is sufficient.
- Gently pat your skin dry; don't rub the skin.

Genital Irritation

Genital skin is very sensitive and irritation is common. Whilst it is often mistaken for infection, irritation is more often due to washing too often or by other irritants. However, genital irritation can be caused by infections, including STIs, and other skin conditions. If your symptoms are not settling, it's a good idea to speak to a clinician or visit SHFPACT to find the cause of the irritation.

Things to avoid:

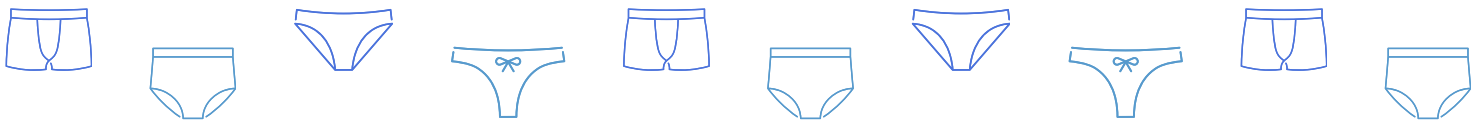
The following can dry out the skin and disrupt its normal balance, worsening any irritation

- Soaps or anything that will lather and remove healthy oils from the skin
- Tea tree oil and other scented oils, paw paw ointment
- Medicated creams, antiseptics, and peroxide (unless prescribed by a doctor)
- Bubble bath, bath salts, feminine hygiene products and other perfumed products
- Highly scented or coloured toilet paper and cleansing wipes (ie baby wipes)
- Pads and panty liners (especially if they are scented)
- Some laundry detergents (choose hypoallergenic ones)
- Products inside the vagina (douches)
- Waxing, shaving, or depilatory creams
- Synthetic underwear (wear cotton instead) or black underwear if suspicion of dye allergy
- Tight clothing and staying in sweaty or wet clothing for long periods
- Scratching the area

Vaginal Discharge

Vaginal discharge is the fluid secreted naturally from the vagina. It is normal and can be clear, white, creamy or slightly yellow in colour, varying with the cycle and hormonal contraceptives, but should not have a strong smell or cause itching. Sometimes irritants, like soaps or perfumed products used in the vaginal area, can upset the natural balance of your body and cause a discharge. Sometimes just stopping the product stops the irritation and discharge. If you have a new vulval/ vaginal symptom such as an itch or a change in discharge, it is a good idea to consult with a health professional.

Changes in discharge can also be caused by an overgrowth of bacteria or thrush that normally lives in the vagina. Bacterial Vaginosis can cause discharge to become watery and fishy smelling; Thrush or Candida can cause the discharge to be white and is often associated with itching. Treatment for Thrush can be bought from a chemist. If it doesn't work, or you need to use treatments regularly, you should see a clinician as the symptoms may be caused by a different condition.



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SHFPACT
SEXUAL HEALTH AND FAMILY PLANNING ACT

Penis hygiene and balanitis

The penis and scrotum are outside the body, so their skin is generally cooler and drier than skin in internal areas. The head of the penis (glans) can produce a white substance called smegma, which is made up of dead skin cells, oils and sweat. Smegma is harmless, but it can accumulate, particularly beneath the foreskin where warmth and moisture may collect.

Balanitis is inflammation of the penis and can be caused by overwashing, soaps, poor hygiene and infections. Symptoms can include redness, swelling, an itch, discharge, an unpleasant smell and a blotchy red rash on the head of the penis. Balanitis usually resolves with good genital care.

If you have a foreskin, gently pull it back to wash the head of the penis and, very importantly, allow to dry completely before replacing the foreskin. You should also pull back the foreskin when you are urinating (weeing). This will prevent urine from touching the foreskin which can sit on the head of the penis and cause irritation. Never forcibly pull back on the foreskin as this can cause scarring.

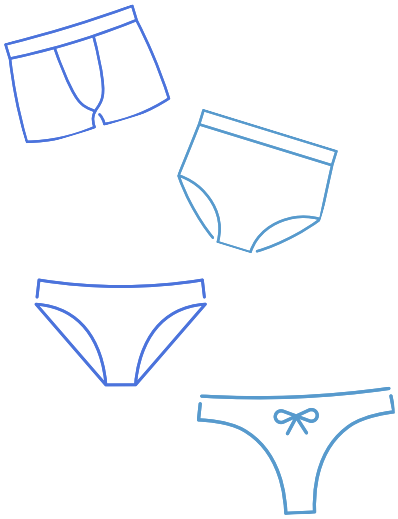
If your foreskin is tight and does not pull back easily, or balanitis symptoms do not resolve with good genital care you should see SHFPACT or your GP to discuss.

Sexual activity and genital skin care

Friction during sex can sometimes irritate the genital area. Using a lubricant (lube) can help reduce this, especially during vaginal or anal sex. If you are using condoms, choose a water-based lube, as oil-based products can weaken condoms and make them less effective. If condoms are not being used, then oil-based lube can be used. This can include vegetable oils such as olive, coconut or almond oil. After sex or masturbation, it is recommended to urinate (wee) and gently rinse the genital area with water, then pat dry. This can help reduce irritation. See SHFPACT's 'Personal Lubricants' factsheet for more information.

SHFPACT Clinical Services

- Contraceptive Advice, Information & Services
- IUD's and other Long Acting Contraceptive Options
- Cervical Screening
- Canberra Menopause Centre
- Pregnancy Options Counselling
- Sexually Transmissible Infections (STIs) Testing, Treatment and Advice
- Blood borne virus and HIV testing
- Emergency Contraception (the 'Morning After' Pill)
- Breast checks and Breast Awareness Education
- Fertility Issues and Pre-conception Advice
- Sexual Difficulties and Sexuality Education
- PrEP Information, Advice and Prescription
- Pelvic Pain
- Medical Termination of Pregnancy



SHPACT is a LARC Centre of Excellence

This means that there are no out-of-pocket costs when you see the doctor for your initial contraception appointment, or for your LARC insertion/removal appointment. You will have to purchase your LARC device from a pharmacy, and this is subsidised under the PBS.

To book a Contraception Consultation (or other services in our clinic), scan the QR code to visit our HotDoc page, and follow the booking prompts.

References: Melbourne Sexual Health Centre: Genital Skin Care
Dept of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Uni of Washington: Guidelines for vulvar skin-care
ANZ Vulvovaginal Society: http://anzvs.org/patient-information/vulval-skin-care/
Shine SA

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Supported by ACT Government

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