

PSST...

# Secret's out about

## FEMALE DISCOMFORT

We don't have to keep it to ourselves, ladies. Many of us experience the symptoms of "vaginal atrophy", as our doctors call it, as we approach menopause, and especially once we've reached it. To get the facts on the condition that may affect as many as 2 million of us in the next decade, we went to Canadian women's health expert Dr. Shawna Johnston.

### Q: WHAT IS VAGINAL ATROPHY?

**A:** Vaginal atrophy refers to changes to the vaginal tissues that happen as a result of estrogen deficiency. When a woman reaches menopause, and sometimes leading up to it, she loses estrogen in her body. The loss of estrogen causes the vaginal tissues to thin and lose elasticity, and also causes the vagina itself to become narrower and shorter and to lose some of its natural blood supply. All of these changes can lead to a number of common symptoms.

### Q: HOW MANY WOMEN EXPERIENCE VAGINAL ATROPHY?

**A:** Every woman eventually becomes estrogen deficient during menopause, so every woman experiences these symptoms to some degree. Unfortunately, I think there are a lot of women suffering in silence out there. Women need to understand that vaginal atrophy is not a disease; it's a natural state. It's a consequence of estrogen deficiency, which happens to everybody.

### Q: WHAT SHOULD A WOMAN DO IF SHE NOTICES ANY OF THE SYMPTOMS?

**A:** Talk to your primary care physician. Vaginal atrophy is something that can be treated. It's important to understand that it will not go away on its own like hot flashes or other temporary symptoms of menopause. In fact, it can continue throughout life. You shouldn't ignore even one symptom. There is treatment out there.



Dr. Shawna Johnston is an associate professor and the postgraduate program director chair of the Division of Urogynaecology and Reconstructive Pelvic Surgery for the departments of Obstetrics & Gynaecology and Urology at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario.

## Have you experienced vaginal atrophy?

You may have felt symptoms of vaginal atrophy without knowing what they were, or that you could get treatment for them. Check off the symptoms you've felt below:

- Burning (while urinating or not)
- Itching
- Dryness
- Vaginal irritation
- Painful intercourse
- Light bleeding after sex
- Frequent urinary tract infections
- A clear or watery discharge
- Urgency with urination
- Urinary incontinence (leaking)

**Remember:** Even one symptom could be a sign of vaginal atrophy. Take this list to your doctor to discuss your treatment options.

Don't keep it a *secret* – there's help available.  
Talk to your doctor about vaginal atrophy.

HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED...

*The Big Ow?*

BURNING. ITCHING. DRYNESS. PAIN.

*Talk About* VAGINAL ATROPHY

As we approach menopause, and especially when we pass it, many of us will experience *The Big Ow*, or symptoms of 'vaginal atrophy'. Your doctor knows about it – ask about mess-free treatments.

learn more:  
**TheBigOw.ca**