

## Genitourinary syndrome of the menopause (GSM)

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### What is genitourinary syndrome of the menopause?

Genitourinary syndrome of the menopause (GSM) is a term that describes various menopausal symptoms. At the menopause there is a dramatic drop in the hormone oestrogen. This affects the tissues in and around the vulva and vagina because oestrogen nourishes the whole of the female pelvis. Over time these tissues become pale in colour and start to thin. As thinning of these tissues continues, vaginal dryness often becomes apparent. Inflammation caused by the dryness can result in vaginal soreness. This can make sexual intercourse uncomfortable or even painful. GSM is also known to affect the bladder; the outlet tube is situated within the vulva, causing bladder symptoms of frequency, urgency and not uncommonly urinary infections.

### How is it treated?

GSM can be treated with topical/vaginal oestrogen cream or pessaries which are available on prescription. The usual dose is to insert a pessary or application of cream every night for two weeks and then to reduce the dose to twice weekly. An applicator is provided with the cream, but cream can be inserted with a clean finger. There is also an E-string available; a ring that sits under the cervix within the vagina. This requires changing three monthly.

Topical oestrogen is a very low dose oestrogen compared to regular hormone replacement therapy (HRT). National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) reviewed and published new guidance regarding its use in December 2019. This states that there is no link to an increased risk of breast cancer to users. Research shows that 10-25% of women who take regular HRT still require topical oestrogen. Topical oestrogen appears to be more successful at treating GSM than oral HRT.

Oestrogen will gradually repair vaginal tissues leading to a reduction in symptoms. Failure to treat can lead to increased bladder symptoms and recurrent urinary infections. A continued low dose is often required to manage symptoms well, but an annual review of its ongoing use by your GP is recommended.

Vaginal moisturisers can be used with topical oestrogen. Some people find them useful before having sexual intercourse. They are available to buy over the counter. They may provide some relief of symptoms but are unable to treat and improve vaginal tissues in the way that topical oestrogen can.

## **PALS**

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email [ndht.pals@nhs.net](mailto:ndht.pals@nhs.net). You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

## **Have your say**

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at [www.careopinion.org.uk](http://www.careopinion.org.uk).

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