

Chronic vulvar pain a reality for more than 100,000 women in southeast Michigan

14 September 2011, by Lauren McLeod

For more than 100,000 area women, chronic vulvar pain (pain at the opening to the vagina) is so severe it makes intercourse, and sometimes sitting for long periods of time, painful, if not impossible.

A new study from the University of Michigan, which surveyed 2,269 [women](#) in the metro Detroit area, found that more than 25 percent of women have experienced ongoing vulvar pain at some point in their lives. However, only two percent of women sought treatment for their pain.

For some, vulvar pain may be caused by activities like biking, tampon use, or [intercourse](#), and for others it can be a persisting, spontaneous pain that can persist for up to 40 years.

Vulvodynia is characterized by a burning, irritation, or sharp pain near the opening of the [vagina](#). The location, constancy and severity of the pain vary among women. Some women say they feel a slight discomfort, while others claim to suffer from knife-like pain. Common treatments, including topical creams, are typically directed towards alleviating symptoms and usually only provide partial [pain relief](#).

The study, available online ahead of print in the [American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology](#), found that aside from the 9.2 percent of women who reported that they were currently experiencing pain consistent with vulvodynia, an additional 17.9 percent of women reported they have experienced symptoms of vulvodynia in the past.

That factors to over 318,000 women in southeast Michigan alone.

"What this means for area women is that vulvar pain is common, it has a name, and it can be addressed with their physicians," says Barbara D. Reed, M.D., M.S.P.H, a professor of [family medicine](#) at the U-M Medical School and lead author of the study.

What researchers have found concerning is that of the two percent of women who sought treatment for their pain, five percent received a diagnosis of vulvodynia. Many women were misdiagnosed with either yeast infections or estrogen deficiency and the subsequent treatment plans they were recommended did little to alleviate their pain, suggesting these may not be causing their symptoms.

The primary goal of the study was to gain insight on the demographics of women with vulvar pain suggesting vulvodynia. Based on survey responses, researchers were able to determine the ethnicities and ages of those women with vulvar discomfort, as well as the intensity of the [pain](#) they experienced.

"With this knowledge, we better understand how common this disorder is, and who is likely to be affected. Knowing this should make it easier for medical providers to expect to see women with this problem, and will therefore make the diagnosis earlier so that treatment can proceed," Reed says.

Provided by University of Michigan

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