

Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA)

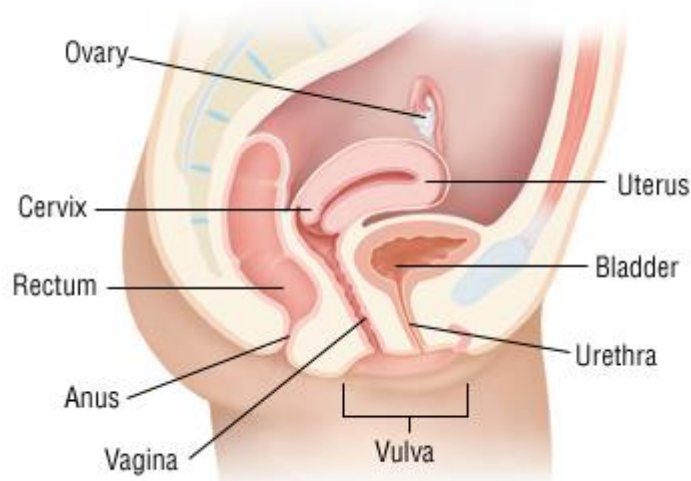


Fact Sheet on Melanoma of the Vulva and Vagina

Introduction

The vagina or birth canal is the opening through which menstrual fluid leaves a woman's body and babies are born. It is connected to the cervix, which is the opening of the uterus or womb, and the vulva (folds of skin around its opening).

Usually, the vagina is in a collapsed position with its walls touching. The walls have many folds that allow the vagina to open and expand during sexual intercourse and vaginal childbirth. The vaginal lining is kept moist by mucus released from glands in the cervix.



[Picture Credit: Female Genitalia]

The vaginal walls have a thin layer of cells called the epithelium, which contains cells called squamous epithelial cells. The vaginal wall, underneath the epithelium, is made up of connective tissue, involuntary muscle tissue, lymph vessels, and nerves.

Melanoma of Female Genitalia

Melanoma is a cancer that starts in cells called melanocytes. Melanocytes are pigment producing cells. They are mostly found in the skin. Most melanomas develop in parts of the body that are exposed to the sun. But one can get them anywhere, including in body organs, because there are melanocytes in those areas too. That is why one sometimes hears melanoma of the skin called cutaneous melanoma or melanoma of the skin. Cutaneous means of the skin. It is still not clear why melanomas can form in parts of the body that are not exposed to the sun.

Even though some melanomas grow in parts of the body that is not exposed to the sun, it is still very important to remember that the best way to keep one's risk of melanoma or other skin cancers as low as possible is to avoid being in the sun too much.

If someone has melanoma in an unusual site such as genital skin, the treatment should be planned by a multidisciplinary team (MDT). The team should include skin melanoma specialists and surgeons and oncologists who normally treat genital cancer.

Incidence of Melanoma of the Female Genitalia

The National Cancer Registry (2014) does not provide any information regarding melanoma of the female genitalia.

Melanoma of the Vagina and Vulva

In this Fact Sheet melanoma of the vagina and vulva will be discussed together under the heading of cancer of the vagina.

[Picture Credit: Vaginal melanoma]



It is not clear what causes vaginal cancers. In general, cancer begins when healthy cells acquire a genetic mutation that turns normal cells into abnormal cells.

Healthy cells grow and multiply at a set rate, eventually dying at a set time. Cancer cells, however, grow and multiply out of control, and they do not die. The accumulating abnormal cells form a mass (tumour).

Cancer cells invade nearby tissues and can break off from an initial tumour to spread elsewhere in the body (metastasise).

Vaginal cancer is divided into different types based on the type of cell where the cancer began.

Vaginal cancer types include:

- Vaginal squamous cell carcinoma, which begins in the thin, flat cells (squamous cells) that line the surface of the vagina, is the most common type
- Vaginal adenocarcinoma, which begins in the glandular cells on the surface of your vagina
- Vaginal melanoma, which develops in the pigment-producing cells (melanocytes) of your vagina
- Vaginal sarcoma, which develops in the connective tissue cells or muscles cells in the walls of your vagina
- Clear cell adenocarcinoma, which occurs in women whose mothers took the drug diethylstilbestrol (DES) during pregnancy between the late 1940s and 1971. It is estimated that one woman out of 1 000 women exposed to DES will develop vaginal cancer.

Signs and Symptoms of Vaginal Cancer

Women with vaginal cancer may experience the following symptoms or signs. Sometimes, women with vaginal cancer may not show any of these symptoms. Or, these symptoms may be caused by a medical condition that is not cancer.

The most common symptom of vaginal cancer may include abnormal vaginal bleeding. Vaginal bleeding, during or after menopause, is not normal and is a sign of a problem. Other symptoms of vaginal cancer may include:

- Abnormal vaginal discharge
- Difficulty or pain when urinating
- Pain during sexual intercourse
- Pain in the pelvic area (the lower part of the abdomen between the hip bones)
- Pain in the back or legs
- Swelling in the legs
- Unusual vaginal bleeding, for example, after intercourse or after menopause.
- Watery vaginal discharge.
- A lump or mass in the vagina.
- Painful urination.
- Constipation.
- Pelvic pain

If a woman is concerned about one or more of the symptoms or signs on this list, she should consult a physician. He/she will conduct a physical examination and also ask how long and how often the symptom(s) have been around, in addition to other questions.

If cancer is diagnosed, relieving symptoms remains an important part of cancer care and treatment. This may also be called symptom management, palliative care, or supportive care. Be sure to talk with the health care team about symptoms experienced, including any new symptoms or a change in symptoms.

Treatment of Melanoma of the Vagina

Surgery may be the best treatment regime that could possibly significantly improve longevity of patients.

Postoperative adjuvant therapy using chemotherapy, radiation therapy, topical creams immunotherapy, and targeted therapy may help prevent recurrence of the tumour

About Clinical Trials

Clinical trials are research studies that involve people. They are conducted under controlled conditions. Only about 10% of all drugs started in human clinical trials become an approved drug.

Clinical trials include:

- Trials to test effectiveness of new treatments

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- Trials to test new ways of using current treatments
- Tests new interventions that may lower the risk of developing certain types of cancers
- Tests to find new ways of screening for cancer

The South African National Clinical Trials Register provides the public with updated information on clinical trials on human participants being conducted in South Africa. The Register provides information on the purpose of the clinical trial; who can participate, where the trial is located, and contact details.

For additional information, please visit: www.sanctr.gov.za/

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