Sensitive issue

Are you one of the thousands of women who suffers from this painful and sometimes embarrassing condition?

It's something that few people will admit to or talk about, but nearly three out of four women in Ireland will experience the painful and often distressing effects of vaginal dryness at some stage in their life. Despite this high number, a massive 59 per cent of sufferers are too embarrassed to seek help from their GP. There's also a worrying lack of awareness around this condition which impacts so many.

"It's unfortunate," says Dr Louise Newson. Also known as 'the menopause doctor', Dr Newson is a GP and women's health expert. A lot of women who I talk to, my patients, will say, ‘Well it’s just part of getting older isn’t it?’ or ‘I’ve never told anyone about it because I never thought there was anything that could be done.’

The good news, thankfully, is that there is a lot that can be done to end the suffering many women experience. However, it's important that women educate themselves on just what vaginal dryness is, so they can recognise the signs that they may need treatment.

"When you say 'vaginal dryness' a lot of people say, 'Well, no, I don't have any dryness'. But then when I say, 'Any soreness? Any irritation? Or even any urinary symptoms?' Because often when you have low estrogen levels around your vagina, it can affect your urinary tract. So a lot of these people find that they have recurrent urinary infections or an increased frequency or urgency to go to the toilet, and that can be linked with [vaginal dryness] as well.

"So it's recognising that they've got a problem and then when they've got a problem it's recognising that there are things that they can do. If they don't get the right help from the first healthcare professional they see, then they should ask again."

Common symptoms of vaginal dryness include itching, pain and discomfort but what causes it? The most common culprit is the menopause which causes fluctuating hormone levels, but it can also develop shortly after you have a baby due to a change in hormones.

"Using tampons can actually cause dryness. There are some drugs, some antidepressants that can cause dryness. We know people with certain conditions, some thyroid conditions, diabetes, even inflammatory bowel conditions, even arthritis can be associated with vaginal dryness. Some people just get it and we don’t know why," says Dr Newson.

So if you’re suffering, how can you get some relief? The good news, says Dr Newson, is that there are “lots of ways” of treating this condition.

"One of the ways that’s really effective and easy and safe is using vaginal moisturisers and lubricants. Lubricant is often used when you have sexual intercourse, but the moisturisers are used regularly, like when you moisturise your legs or your face, it’s the same. But there are some very awful products out there that can cause a lot more drying or irritation.

"If women don’t know where to go, they’ll often get the wrong products. A lot of women I speak to, their husbands have gone off to Ann Summers or they’ve got some heavy branded product that maybe is scented and it can actually cause a lot more drying and irritation.”

With vaginal moisturisers it’s important to choose products that will give the moisture back.

“Products like Regelle will last three days, so they don’t have to use it every day which is really nice, but it can also help with the PH as well. The acidity of our vagina changes as we get older and then you’re more likely to get infections, so having something that can alter that can make a difference too.”

It’s so important that you use these types of products regularly though, as you have to constantly replenish moisture levels in order to feel the benefits, Dr Newson notes.

Another popular treatment for vaginal dryness is the use of vaginal estrogen. "I often prescribe vaginal estrogen because, especially when [vaginal dryness] is associated with the menopause, it’s a lack of estrogen. We know that [estrogen cream] can be used in the long term. It’s not like HRT, it doesn’t have any risk with it, so it has benefits and that’s often used in conjunction with using moisturisers and lubricants as well.”

Dr Newson also encourages women to speak up if they’re suffering and to read up on the condition.

"I think trying to read a little bit about it is really important. I’ve got a website www.menopausedoctor.co.uk and there’s some information you can download as a PDF on vaginal dryness, because it is embarrassing. [I would tell people] not to be embarrassed, not to be shy and actually to ask for advice. And if you don’t get the right advice then ask someone else.”

Dr Newson has teamed up with Regelle, a vaginal moisture brand, to raise awareness about this condition. For details see www.regelle.ie