Vulvodynia: Causes, Diagnosis and Modern Therapy

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Vulvodynia is defined as chronic vulvar discomfort with a duration of at least three months. This discomfort can be expressed as pain, burning, itching, dyspareunia (painful sexual intercourse), stinging, rawness, or "irritation" of a constant or intermittent nature.

Etiology

There are over 100 known causes of vulvodynia. These are divided into two main categories: those that are idiopathic (do not have an identifiable cause) and those that can be linked to a specific diagnosis. For those with idiopathic vulvodynia, the cause may be related to psychological or emotional factors. For those with specific diagnoses, the cause is more often physical in nature. For both categories, the incidence of vulvodynia is difficult to determine because it is often confused with other vulvar disorders.

Diagnosis

The initial work up to make an accurate diagnosis includes a medical history, physical examination, and a vulvar examination. The physician may perform a biopsy or cultures to determine if there is an underlying infection or if there are bacterial or fungal growths. A biopsy should be considered if the vulvar skin shows unusual color or texture. Additional work up may include lab tests to rule out infection, inflammation, and autoimmunity.

Treatment

Treatment depends on the underlying cause of the vulvodynia. If a specific diagnosis is made, the treatment is directed at controlling the underlying problem. If the cause is idiopathic, the treatment is aimed at reducing the discomfort caused by vulvodynia. For both categories, the patient may be referred to a mental health professional or a doctor who specializes in vulvar disease. The patient and doctor should discuss their goals for treatment and have realistic expectations for their outcome. For those with idiopathic vulvodynia, the treatment may include medication, behavior therapy, or both.

Surgical intervention may be considered for those with idiopathic vulvodynia who have not responded to medical treatment. The surgery is aimed at removing any one of the major or minor vestibular glands. The surgery is a quick and easy procedure and is usually done under local anesthesia. If the glands are removed, the procedure is called a vulvectomy. The success rate for this procedure is high, with over 75% of patients experiencing relief.

References:

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