

# The dryness that's hard to talk about

By Lavinia Winch

## The dryness that's hard to talk about

The Gynaecological side effects of Sjögren's Syndrome are an important, yet often overlooked, aspect of the disease. Even though vaginal dryness is a common occurrence during menopause, women with Sjögren's Syndrome report this symptom 2-3 times more often than comparably aged women without Sjögren's Syndrome. Vaginal atrophy develops during menopause as a consequence of a marked decline in serum levels of estrogen. The presence of Sjögren's Syndrome appears to aggravate the symptoms of vaginal atrophy. This may be manifested by the thinning of the vaginal tissue, decreased vaginal moisture and reduced elasticity of the vagina.

As a consequence, women with vaginal atrophy may note vaginal burning, itching and pain with intercourse. These symptoms may also stem from other causes, such as vaginal infections, vulval disorders such as Lichen Planus, Lichen Sclerosus or Vulvodynia, and local reactions to soaps, detergents, lubricants or sanitary products. The treatment of vaginal dryness in women with Sjögren's Syndrome includes the use of vaginal moisturisers, water soluble lubricants during sexual activity, and topical vaginal oestrogen in the form of a pessary, ring or cream.

Topical oestrogen may be the most effective treatment for vaginal atrophy, and it is useful to note that natural and organic lubricants and vaginal moisturisers can be safely used in combination with prescribed oestrogen.

The lack of oestrogen can also affect the pH of the vagina and this can lead to an increase in infections such as Thrush, Bacterial Vaginosis and Urinary Tract Infections.

So, what is advisable, and to be avoided in the wide range of OTC products available?

There is increasing awareness and growing concern about the chemical ingredients used in intimacy products such as personal lubricants and vaginal moisturisers.

The tissues of the vagina are not like skin on the rest of our body, which is protected by a thick layer of cells known as the Stratum Corneum. These intimate areas are vulnerable and delicate mucous membranes that more easily absorb chemicals are more likely to be irritated and damaged.

Ingredients to be avoided are the widely used glycerine, perfumes and flavours which can act as mucosal irritants, while petroleum, propylene glycol and silicone, commonly found in many lubricant products, are not regarded as contributing to vaginal health, and can also act as irritants.



As well as the avoidance of known mucosal irritants within the ingredients, two other vital considerations exist in assessing the safety and suitability of the intimacy products on offer. These are pH and Osmolality.

A normal healthy vaginal environment is moist and acidic (low pH). An acidic environment around pH4 is typical and protects the vagina from infections. This acidity is made by a naturally occurring good bacteria population (called lactobacillus). When this population is reduced or compromised it cannot make sufficient lactic acid to keep the pH low.

Any intimacy product should always be checked for its pH. It should say pH buffered or balanced to match vaginal pH on the packaging. If pH is not mentioned – it should be avoided. Many products on the market are not made to match vaginal pH, and when they are too alkaline, they disrupt the delicate vaginal ecology, exposing a woman to infection and irritancy. When the upsetting symptoms of soreness and itchiness develop in the intimate area, they can often be attributed to a disturbance in the pH level.

Although most women will have some concept of acid / alkaline balance, not many will be familiar with the concept of osmolality. What does this term mean? Osmolality is a measure of the strength of a liquid to pull water through a membrane like a cell wall. Perhaps you remember osmosis at school? It's the same thing. Why is this important? Intimate lubricants with a high value (hyperosmotic) pull so much water out of surrounding tissues that they damage the cells and irritate the mucous membranes. Using an intimate product that irritates is clearly not desirable. Glycerine, glycols, sugars and sweet flavourings are the main and easily identifiable culprit ingredients that cause lubricants

to have a high osmolality. If such dense ingredients form greater than 20% of a product, they will dehydrate the tissues through the process of osmosis, and irritate the mucosa. KY Jelly is an example of a product that is hyperosmotic and not suitable as a lubricant or moisturiser. Vaseline is also not recommended for vaginal dryness.

Natural intimate glycerine-free lubricants whose formulations are based on plant gums, which impart moisture and a degree of slipperiness to overcome friction, are preferable. Where a longer lasting or more robust product is required, women should look for products made with natural plant oils and butters for their safe and gentle emollient power. Certified Organic products are obviously superior in the guarantee of purity and safety that they provide, but they should be designed specifically for vaginal use.

Registered medical devices, and accreditations by professional bodies give vital reassurance, so women should look for the CE mark on the packaging, and the logos that confirm the safety and status of the products. Read the ingredients on the label. The shorter the ingredient list the better!

When no ingredients are mentioned you have to be sceptical about the trustworthiness of a product that cannot declare its ingredients.

#### Quick summary

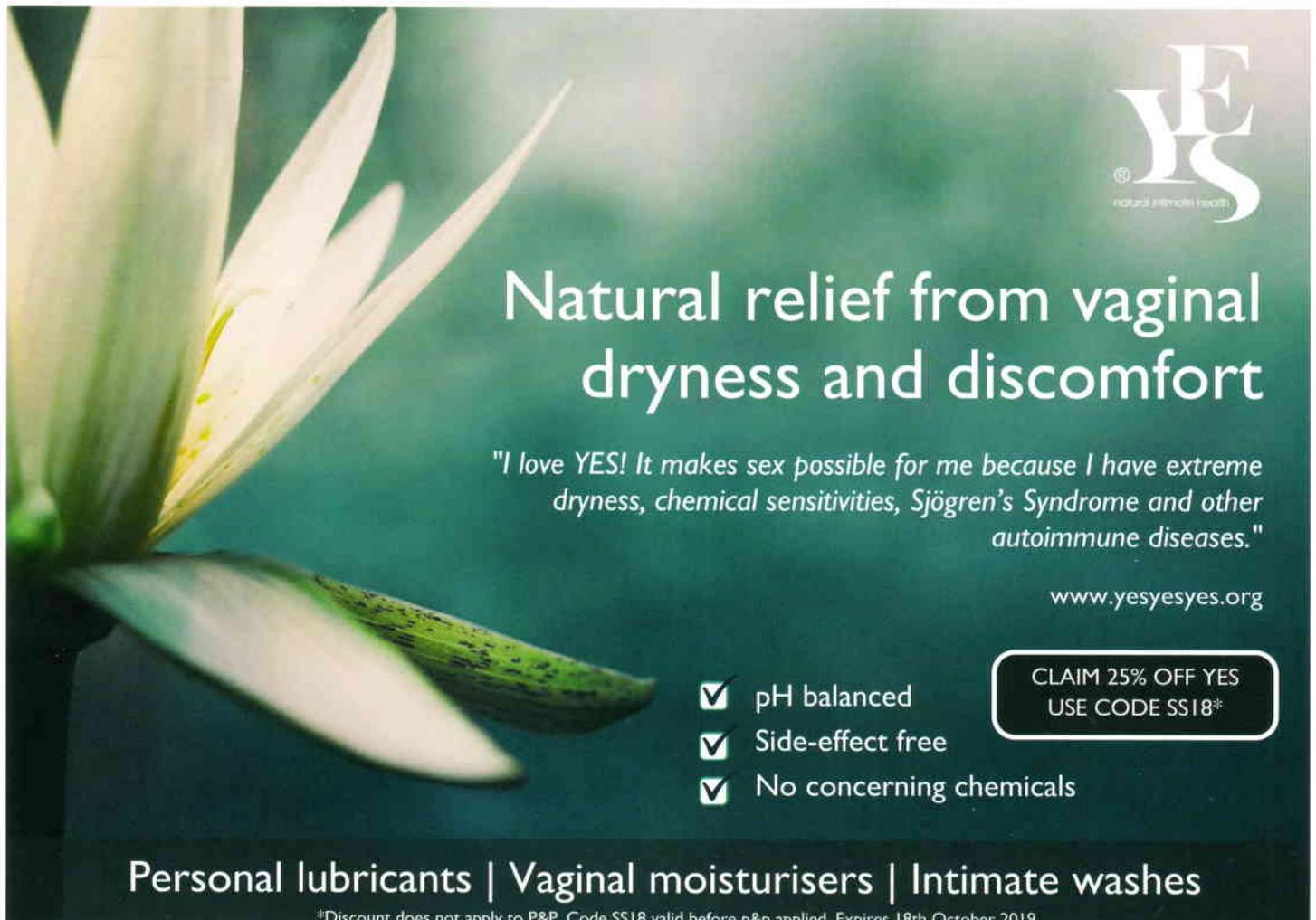
How to choose the best and safest intimate lubricants for vaginal atrophy

- Ingredients - avoid glycerine, parabens, silicone, glycols, parfum, and petroleum. Avoid products that do NOT list ingredients
- pH - products should be pH buffered to match the typical acidic vaginal pH, and this should be stated on the packaging.
- No sugars – glycols, glycerine and sweet flavourings will dehydrate intimate tissues.
- 3rd party reassurance – look for recognised certifications and symbols, such as CE marks and Certified Organic, which demonstrate that the products are what they say.

For a medical reference to pH and Osmolality in vaginal moisturisers and lubricants visit:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.3109/13697137.2015.1124259>

Lavinia Winch is responsible for medical liaison at The YES YES Company and is Brand Ambassador for YES Organic Lubricants and Vaginal Moisturisers. She writes from both a personal and professional perspective, integrating her own intimate health journey with the knowledge she has gained from liaising with Health Care Professionals, and addressing customer's sexual health issues over the last nine years. As a patient representative, Lavinia's experience of a mis-diagnosed vulval condition many years ago, through menopause and a recent Endometrial Cancer diagnosis resulting in a total hysterectomy, give her valuable insights into many aspects of intimate health.





## Natural relief from vaginal dryness and discomfort

*"I love YES! It makes sex possible for me because I have extreme dryness, chemical sensitivities, Sjögren's Syndrome and other autoimmune diseases."*

[www.yesyesyes.org](http://www.yesyesyes.org)

- ✓ pH balanced
- ✓ Side-effect free
- ✓ No concerning chemicals

**CLAIM 25% OFF YES  
USE CODE SS18\***

Personal lubricants | Vaginal moisturisers | Intimate washes

\*Discount does not apply to P&P. Code SS18 valid before p&p applied. Expires 18th October 2019.