

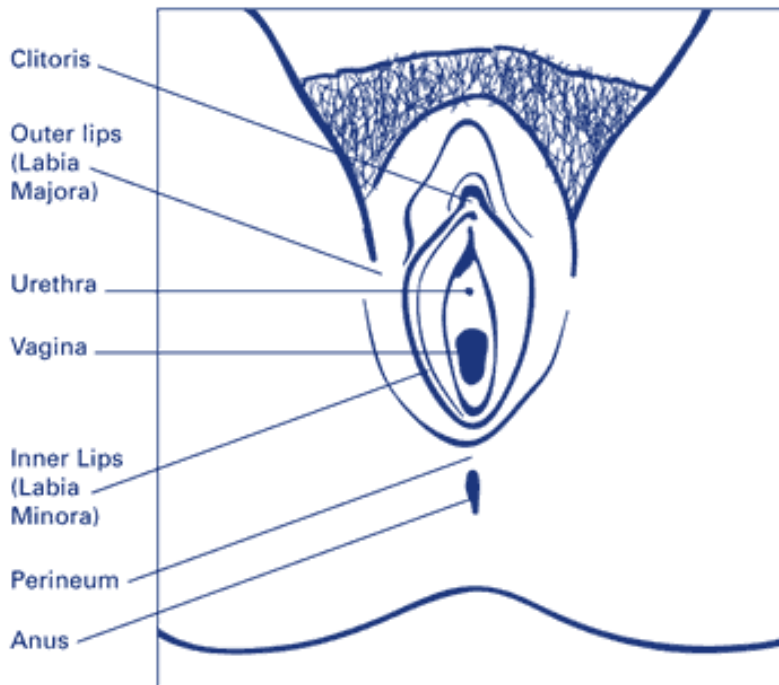
Cancer of the vulva

What is vulvar cancer?

Cancer of the vulva (also known as vulvar cancer) may involve any of the external female sex organs, called the vulva. The vulva are a woman's external sex organs between her legs. The vulva comprises soft fatty tissue covered with pubic hair called the Mons Pubis (Mount of Venus), which is above the labia. There are two large outer lips, or labia, (the labia majora), which surround two inner delicate and thinner lips (the labia minora). The most common areas for vulvar cancer to develop are the inner edges of the labia majora and the labia minora.

Less often, vulvar cancer may also involve the clitoris or the Bartholin's glands (small glands, one on each side of the vagina). The clitoris lies where the labia minora join at the top. It is a highly sensitive organ which fills with blood and enlarges in size when stimulated, and can result in sexual excitement and orgasm, or climax.

The area of the skin between the vulva and anus is called the perineum. Cancer can also affect the perineum.



How common is vulvar cancer?

Cancer of the vulva is rare. Around 70 women are diagnosed with vulvar cancer in NSW each year.

It usually affects postmenopausal women, between the ages of 55 and 75, but can occur in younger or older women and is becoming more common in younger women.

What are the causes?

Precancerous conditions

Although the cause of cancer of the vulva remains unknown, it has been linked to certain precancerous conditions.

A condition called VIN (vulvar intraepithelial neoplasia) occurs in the skin of the vulva and can develop into vulvar cancer if left untreated. Almost one-third of vulvar cancers develop in women who have VIN.

The human papilloma virus (HPV), or wart virus, also appears to be associated with VIN. In younger women, a precancerous lesion (area of tissue) is more likely to be associated with HPV, and this increases the risk of vulvar cancer.

Older women who get vulvar cancer usually don't have a link with HPV.

Skin conditions

Women who have had certain non-cancerous skin conditions for a long time have an increased risk of developing vulvar cancer. These conditions, called vulval lichen sclerosus and vulval lichen planus, affect the skin in the vulvar area. The skin can become inflamed and itchy, and split and crack, causing pain. The vulva may become distorted, and change in shape and size.

Almost two-thirds of vulvar cancers occur in women who also have lichen sclerosus, but only a small percentage (1—2%) of women with lichen sclerosus will go on to develop vulvar cancer.

Smoking

Cigarette smoking increases the risk of developing both VIN and vulvar cancer. This may be because smoking can make the immune system work less effectively.

Cancer of the vulva, like other cancers, is not infectious and cannot be passed on to other people. An inherited faulty gene does not cause it and so other members of your family are not likely to be at risk of developing it.

For more detailed information consult the booklet *Understanding cancer of the vulva* on www.cancertas.org.au/pages/healthprof_patient.php

Call The Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20