Vaginismus and Infertility

What is vaginismus?

Vaginismus refers to involuntary tightening of the walls of the vagina. This can interfere with sex by causing pain and soreness during penetration (when the penis enters the vagina) and for some women it can make penetrative sex impossible. It may also cause discomfort during vaginal examinations by a healthcare professional. Vaginismus can be a cause of infertility as penetrative sex needed for pregnancy may not be possible. There are two main types of vaginismus: primary and secondary.

What is the difference between primary and secondary vaginismus?

If uncontrolled tightening of a woman’s vaginal walls has always been present, it is called primary vaginismus. If a woman used to have sex without pain or discomfort but now experiences pain when attempting sex, it is called secondary vaginismus.

What are the symptoms of vaginismus?

The main symptom of vaginismus is pain or discomfort when attempting penetration. For some women entry of the penis may be impossible and therefore she may never have had sex. Some women may find vaginal examinations or having smear tests painful. Difficulty inserting a tampon because of pain or tightness may be another sign of vaginismus. The diagram below shows how the muscles in a woman’s vagina tighten and cause difficulties with entry into the vagina.

![Diagram showing impossible penetration and tightness & pain](image)

This pain can cause women to fear having sex with their partner and lead to complete avoidance of sex and intimacy. Fear of pain or soreness can cause symptoms of vaginismus to get worse. This is described in the ‘Cycle of Pain’ diagram below.
It is important to remember that these symptoms are involuntary, therefore cannot be controlled.

What is the cause of vaginismus?

There are many different causes of vaginismus, some of them are physical, some may be psychological or it can be a mixture of both. However, sometimes no cause can be found for vaginismus. Physical causes include: a yeast infection such as thrush or an infection in your urine. Vaginismus may also occur after surgery to the pelvis or after cancer in the pelvic area. Psychological causes include: anxiety, fear of pain, history of sexual abuse or violence.

Can vaginismus be treated?

The good news is that vaginismus can be treated but it may take some time. You may need to seek professional help for this treatment. Treatment can consist of physical therapy or psychological therapy. This may include pelvic floor exercises, use of vaginal dilators or going to see a counsellor.

What are pelvic floor exercises?

As vaginismus is caused by tightening of the vaginal walls, pelvic floor exercises may be useful to help relax these muscles. The pelvic floor muscles act as a ‘sling’ to support the organs in the pelvic cavity – womb, bladder, bowel etc. These muscles are also used to stop and start the flow of urine. Pelvic floor exercises are quick and easy to do but may need a bit of practice.

How do I perform pelvic floor exercises?

- First, it is important to make sure you are exercising the right muscles. Imagine you are passing urine and trying to stop the flow. You should feel a small twitch or tightening in your muscles
- Empty your bladder, then sit or lie down
- Squeeze and lift the pelvic floor without tightening your buttocks
- It is important not to hold your breath or tighten your abdominal muscles
- Keep the muscles tight for 5 – 10 seconds and then relax them
- Repeat this 10 times in a row, once or twice a day.
What are vaginal dilators?

A dilator is a smooth, inflexible cylinder made of plastic or rubber which is inserted into the vagina. Vaginal dilators are used to reduce the involuntary spasm of vaginal walls upon penetration. They come in a variety of sizes. Gradual progression from the smallest size to the biggest size will prepare your body for penetrative sex. Ask in your local pharmacy about buying vaginal dilators or they can easily be bought over the internet on a number of different websites which are listed below.

How do I use a vaginal dilator?

- Find a comfortable position, either lying down on your back with your knees bent and legs slightly open or, standing with one leg raised on a chair
- Place a small mirror between your legs if you need help in finding the opening to the vagina
- Start with the smallest dilator and over time gradually increase in size
- You may want to put some lubricant (such as KY jelly) on the tip of the dilator to help slide the dilator into the vagina
- Gently slide the dilator into the vagina as far as you can go without causing pain. You may need to stop and start a few times
- Once inserted as far you can go, move the dilator in a circular motion for around 5 minutes or as long as you can tolerate
- When removing the dilator push it in and out and move from side to side
- This should be repeated at least 3 times a week
- When you feel comfortable with using the smallest dilator, move to the next size up and so on.

Should I go for counselling?

If you are experiencing vaginismus we strongly advise you to see a counsellor. The Cork Fertility Centre has an excellent in-house counsellor. A counsellor can guide you in the correct way to perform pelvic floor exercises and use of dilators. They can also teach other necessary techniques and exercises to help overcome vaginismus. Most importantly, they provide a supportive environment where you can freely discuss your concerns.

Where can I get more information?

If you want more information or support on dealing with vaginismus, please contact the staff of the Cork Fertility Centre who can refer you to our in-house counsellor. Other information can be accessed on the below websites:

www.time2talksexualhealth.com
www.vaginismus.com

Vaginal dilators can be bought from the following websites:
www.beecourse.com
www.blushingbuyer.co.uk
www.amazon.co.uk