



# NATIONAL CENTRE FOR GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCERS

## What is vulval cancer?

Vulval cancer is a cancer that arises from the tissues of the vulva. It can also be called cancer of the vulva, vulva cancer or vulvar cancer.

### The vulva

The vulva is the external part of a woman's sex organs.

It consists of soft fatty tissue covered with pubic hair called the Mons Pubis (Mount of Venus), which is above the labia. The labia have two outer larger lips (the labia majora), which surround two inner smaller and thinner lips (the labia minora).

At the top, where the labia minora join, is a highly sensitive organ called the clitoris. When stimulated, the clitoris fills with blood and enlarges in size. Stimulation of the clitoris can result in sexual excitement and orgasm, or climax.

Just below the clitoris is the opening through which women pass urine (the urethra) and below this is the vagina, a tubular passage through which menstrual blood flows, sexual intercourse occurs, and a baby is born.

The area of the skin between the vulva and anus is called the perineum. All these structures are visible from outside the body.

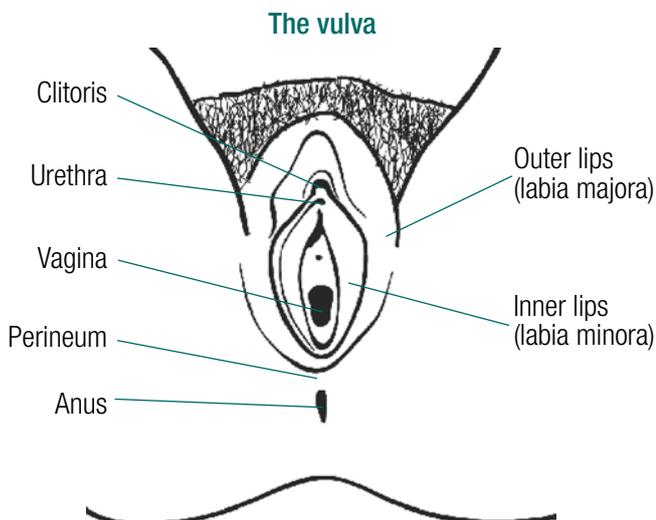
Cancer of the vulva may involve any of the external female sex organs. The most common areas for it to develop are the inner edges of the labia majora and the labia minora.

Less often, vulval cancer may also involve the clitoris or the Bartholin's glands (small glands, one on each side of the vagina). It can also affect the perineum.

### What is cancer?

Cancer is a group of many related diseases. All cancers begin in cells, the body's basic building blocks.

Normally, cells grow and multiply in an orderly way.



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However, damaged genes can cause them to behave abnormally. They may grow into a lump called a tumour. Tumours can be benign (not cancer) or malignant (cancer).

A malignant tumour is made up of cancer cells. If these cells are not treated, they may spread beyond their normal boundaries and into surrounding tissues, becoming invasive cancer. This spread of cancer is called metastasis.

When cancer spreads from its original place to another part of the body, the new tumour has the same kind of abnormal cells and the same name as the primary tumour.

For more information about cancer and how it spreads, see our factsheet [What is cancer?](#)

## Types of vulval cancer

- **Squamous cell carcinoma:** Most vulval cancers (90 per cent) develop from squamous cells, the skin cells of the vulva. These cancers usually grow very slowly over a few years.
- **Vulval melanoma:** Vulval melanomas develop from melanin, the cells that produce pigment and give skin its colour. Only about 2 to 4 per cent of vulval cancers are melanoma.
- **Adenocarcinoma:** These are very rare. They develop from cells that line glands in the vulval skin. Paget's disease of the vulva is a pre-malignant condition where glandular cells spread outwards and across the vulval skin.
- **Verrucous carcinoma:** This rare, very slow-growing type of cancer looks like a large wart.
- **Sarcomas:** These are extremely rare. Sarcomas develop from cells in tissue, such as muscle or fat under the skin, and tend to grow more quickly than other types of cancer.

## Staging and grading of vulval cancer

The stage of a cancer is a term used to describe its size and whether it has spread beyond its original area of the body.

The grade of a cancer describes how quickly the tumour is likely to grow.

Knowing the extent of the cancer and the grade helps the doctors to decide on the most appropriate treatment.

### Staging

If tests find vulval cancer, one of the following stages will be used to describe your cancer:

- **Stage 0 (carcinoma in-situ):** Abnormal cells are found on the surface of the vulval skin. These abnormal cells may become cancer and spread into nearby normal tissue. For more information, see our factsheet [Vulval cancer: Who is at risk?](#)
- **Stage 1:** Cancer is found only in the vulva and/or in the perineum, which is the space between the opening of the rectum and the vagina. The affected area is 2 cm or less in size.
- **Stage 2:** Cancer is found in the vulva and/or the perineum. The affected area is larger than 2 cm.
- **Stage 3:** Cancer is found in the vulva and/or perineum and has spread to nearby tissues such as the lower part of the urethra (the tube through which urine passes), the vagina, the anus (the opening of the rectum) and/or nearby lymph nodes.
- **Stage 4:** Cancer has spread beyond the urethra, vagina and anus into the lining of the bladder or the bowel, or it may have spread to the lymph nodes in the pelvis or to other parts of the body.
- **Recurrent:** If the cancer comes back after initial treatment, this is known as recurrent cancer. Vulval cancer may come back in the vulva or in another part of the body.

### *Grading*

A pathologist will use tests on your cancer biopsy to 'grade' your cancer. Grade refers to the extent of similarity of cancer cells to normal cells. Low-grade tumours tend to grow more slowly while high-grade tumours grow faster and spread more quickly.

### **Sources**

We thank the following organisations for allowing their information to be used for this factsheet:

Cancer Council New South Wales

[www.cancercouncil.com.au](http://www.cancercouncil.com.au)

National Cancer Institute (USA)

[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

## **NATIONAL CENTRE FOR GYNAECOLOGICAL CANCERS**

**CANCER AUSTRALIA**

ABN 21075951918

**The National Centre for Gynaecological Cancers is an Australian Government initiative to improve outcomes for women affected by gynaecological cancers, their families and carers, and to lessen the impact of cancer on their lives. It has been established by Cancer Australia.**

### **What is vulval cancer? 2010**

Last updated 2009. The information in this fact sheet was current at the time of publication. To check if it is the most up-to date version, please call 02 6217 9818

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