



HEALTH UPDATE

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Bartholin's Gland Cyst or Abscess

What is a Bartholin's gland cyst?

A Bartholin's gland cyst is a fluid-filled swelling of a Bartholin's gland. Bartholin's glands are two small glands on each side of the opening of the vagina at about the 4 and 8 o'clock positions. They have small ducts that open to the outside. The glands produce a fluid that helps protect the tissues around the vagina and provides lubrication during sexual intercourse. Normally, these glands cannot be felt or seen.

How does it occur?

A cyst may develop when the duct of one of the glands becomes swollen and blocked. Injury, irritation, or infection may cause a buildup of fluid and swelling that blocks the duct.

Are Bartholin's gland cysts caused by an infection?

Most of the time, Bartholin's gland cysts are not infected. In some cases, however, they can be caused by an infection, or they may become infected. Most infected cysts, or abscesses, contain the normal bacteria that are found on your skin. Some infected cysts, however, are caused by sexually transmitted bacteria.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms are:

- Swelling - a round, painless or slightly tender bulge near the opening of the vagina.
- Tenderness/pain - especially if the cyst is infected, walking or sitting may be painful.
- Dyspareunia - pain with sexual contact.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and will examine you to see whether you have a swollen area at the opening of the vagina. The swelling will be diagnosed as a Bartholin's gland *cyst* if it does not seem to be infected. If it is painful and infected, it is called a Bartholin's gland *abscess*.

How is it treated?

The treatment can depend on one or more of these factors: the size of the cyst, how painful it is, if it is infected, whether it has recurred, and your age. In some cases, a small cyst can just be watched over time to see if it grows. Sometimes the cyst will go away if you put warm, moist compresses on it or sit in warm baths. The moist heat can help unblock the opening so that the fluid can drain out. Your health care provider may want to culture the fluid in the cyst to see if an antibiotic is required.

A cyst may become infected and form an abscess, which can be very painful. Nonprescription medicine such as aspirin, acetaminophen, or ibuprofen may help relieve the pain. For a large cyst or an abscess, your health care provider may make a small cut over the gland and either insert a tiny tube or sew it open so that fluid can drain out. This is usually done with a local anesthetic so that you don't feel pain during the procedure. If a cyst is infected, your health care provider may prescribe an antibiotic. You may have light discharge for a few days. The tube is usually removed after about 10 to 14 days.

How can I help take care of myself?

Follow your health care provider's instructions, and call the clinic [(434) 924-2773] if you have any of these signs of infection:

- Redness around the cyst

- Fever

- Pain

- Additional swelling

How long will the effects last?

With the treatment of warm compresses, the cyst may go away in 3 to 5 days. Sometimes the cyst does not go away with this treatment. If your health care provider has made an incision for drainage, the cyst usually goes away almost immediately, though the surrounding swelling may take a few days to resolve.

Will the cyst come back?

Bartholin's gland cysts or abscesses do sometimes come back after initial treatment. When a cyst comes back it can be treated again. Occasionally the whole Bartholin's gland needs to be surgically removed, especially if the cyst comes back repeatedly. The gland can be removed without damage to that area of the vaginal opening. You can have sexual intercourse without the gland.

How can I help prevent a Bartholin's gland cyst?

Make sure you keep the area of the vagina clean with mild soap and warm water. Avoid hard or deep rubbing in the area around the opening of the vagina. If you take long bike rides or often ride horses, try to protect your genital area by cushioning it with soft padding.

For additional information:

<http://www.mamashealth.com/women/bar.asp>

<http://www.nhsborders.org.uk/uploads/16302/bartholins.pdf>