



Patient & Family Guide

2022

Vulvectomy



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Vulvectomy

What is a vulvectomy?

A vulvectomy is surgery to remove part of the vulva. The vulva is the fatty folds around the openings to your vagina and bladder.

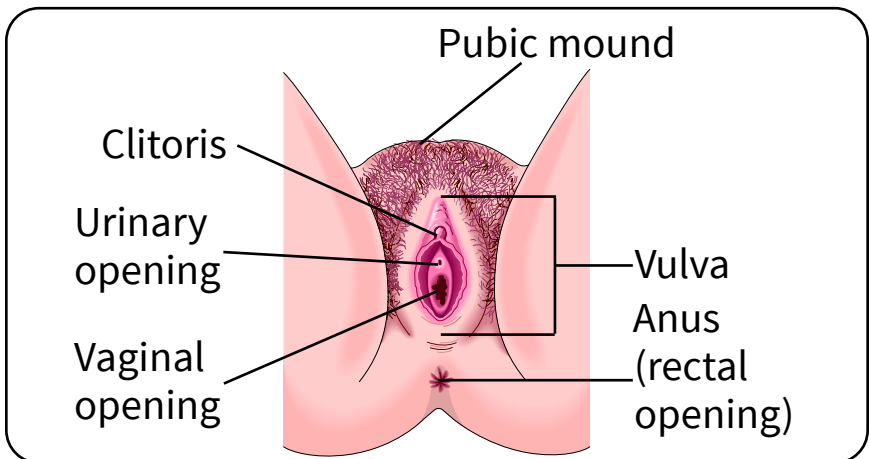
There are different types of vulvectomies:

Simple vulvectomy or wide local excision of the vulva:

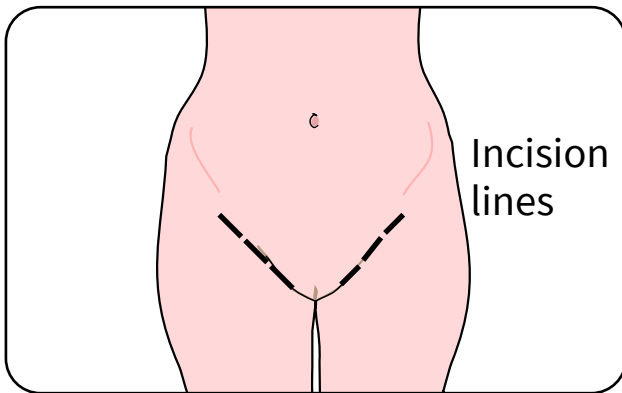
- › This surgery removes the tumour on the vulva and some normal skin around it.

Radical vulvectomy:

- › This surgery removes the tumour on the vulva and a larger area of normal skin and deeper tissue around it.



- During your vulvectomy, you may also have a **groin node dissection**. In a groin node dissection, some of the lymph nodes in your groin may be taken out. Lymph nodes are pea-sized glands that fight infection. Lymph nodes may be taken out of one or both sides of your groin.
- If you have a groin node dissection, you will probably have a small tube or drain in the groin incision (cut).
- If lymph nodes in your groin are taken out, they will be checked to see if cancer has spread to them.



Before surgery

- Blood samples will be taken. Usually this happens a few days before your surgery. This can vary from patient to patient.
- **Do not** eat or drink after midnight the night before your surgery.

After surgery

You will have:

- › An incision on your vulva and possibly in your groin.
- › An intravenous (IV) tube in your arm to give you fluids.
- › A catheter (tube) in your bladder to drain urine (pee), if needed.

Breathing

You will be asked to take deep breaths and to cough every 1 to 2 hours. This is to help prevent lung problems like pneumonia (lung infection). Your nurse will give you a sheet called *Patient Passport: Gynecologic Oncology Surgery* which explains how to do deep breathing exercises.

Pain

- At first, you may have pain around your incision(s). We will give you medication to help with the pain. Pain medication can be given every 3 to 4 hours, as needed.
- Please tell your nurse when you are starting to feel sore. **Do not** wait until the pain is very bad.

Activity

Usually, a nurse will help you get out of bed and walk around the day after your surgery. Depending on the type of surgery, you may be asked to stay in bed for the first day.

Food

You can eat and drink soon after surgery. When you are drinking well, your IV will be taken out.

Blood clots

- In the hospital, you will get an injection of a blood-thinning medication called Fragmin® to help prevent blood clots. Moving your feet and legs every hour will also help prevent blood clots.
- If your lymph nodes were taken out, you may need to keep taking Fragmin® at home for about 28 days.

Swelling in your legs

- Lymph nodes control how fluids move in your body. If your lymph nodes were taken out, your legs may swell. Whenever you are sitting or laying down, raise your legs for several hours each day to lower swelling. You can do this by putting your legs up on 2 pillows.
- You may also need to wear special support stockings. You may be asked to wear these stockings for a few months after your surgery.

Care of your incision(s)

- It is important to keep the area around your vulva as clean and dry as possible.
- After surgery, the nurses will clean your incision(s) regularly.
- The nurses will show you how to rinse yourself with a peri-wash spray bottle. Use the spray bottle after you pee until your incision(s) is healed. You may take this bottle home with you.
- Your nurse will also show you how to have a sitz bath. Have a sitz bath 3 times a day until your incision(s) is healed. After each sitz bath, carefully pat the area dry — **do not rub**.

At home

- The area around your vulva may be numb or tender. The skin taken out during surgery was like padding for that area. Try sitting on pillows or on something soft.
- You may find that your pee ‘sprays’ when you go to the bathroom and gets your thighs wet. This happens because the outer folds of skin around the opening to your bladder have been taken out. You may need to change how you sit on the toilet seat.
- Keep the area around your vulva as dry as possible. After you pee, rinse the area with your peri-wash spray bottle, and then carefully pat it dry.
- Wear loose clothing and breathable cotton underwear.
- Avoid wearing pantyhose, tights, or shapewear.
- **Do not** use powder or scented soaps on the area around your vulva.

Sex

- You can start to have sex again 6 to 8 weeks after your surgery, **as long as your incision(s) has fully healed.**

- You and your partner should start slowly and gently. If sex is uncomfortable, a water-based lubricant may help.
- The area around your vulva may feel numb after surgery. Feeling may come back over several months, or it may never come back.
- The clitoris is the sensitive tissue found above the opening to your bladder. People with a clitoris usually feel pleasure when it is touched. **If your clitoris was taken out, you will have less feeling in this area.**
- Other sensitive areas include chest, thighs, earlobes, and the back of the neck. Keep an open mind. Touching, cuddling, and stroking these areas can give great pleasure.
- If you find your usual positions uncomfortable, you may want to try other positions (like lying on your side or being on top). Placing a pillow under your bum may make you more comfortable.
- Each person reacts to this surgery in a different way. You may be worried about how it will affect you and your partner. This is normal. Give yourself time to adjust physically and emotionally. Most people feel confident and comfortable going back to their usual routines and activities within a few months after surgery.

Call your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner) or go to the nearest Emergency Department if you have:

- › Fever (temperature above 38° C/100.4° F)
- › More redness, swelling, or warmth around the incision(s)
- › More pain or tenderness around the incision(s)
- › Edges of the incision(s) come apart
- › Drainage from the incision(s) that smells bad
- › Vaginal discharge that is heavier than a normal period or has a bad smell
- › Chest pain or shortness of breath, or pain, redness, and swelling of one leg — These can be signs of a blood clot.

Resources

Canadian Cancer Society

› www.cancer.ca

› Phone (toll-free): 1-888-939-3333

Call or search for “Sexuality and Cancer” on the website.

Please talk to your health care team about your concerns or questions.

What are your questions?

Please ask. We are here to help you.

