



Bartholin's glands

Treating cysts and abscesses

Bartholin's glands are two pea size glands that are located next to the vaginal entrance and they cannot normally be seen or felt. They usually secrete a small amount of fluid through a duct which keeps the entrance of the vagina moist.

If the duct becomes blocked, a fluid-filled swelling known as a cyst can form. If the cyst becomes infected, the swelling may become filled with pus and it is then called an abscess. A Bartholin's cyst or abscess affects up to 3 in 100 women and can be treated with antibiotics or a small procedure.

Bartholin's cysts and abscesses have a characteristic appearance. They can be diagnosed by a vaginal examination by a doctor. No tests are required.

What are the symptoms?

Most women notice a lump in the vulva. Cysts do not often cause any other symptoms, although some women may experience pain or discomfort when walking, sitting or having sex.

Symptoms of an abscess include:

- Severe pain – it might be painful to walk
- Not being able to sit or have sex
- Swelling
- Redness

Treatment

A small cyst that does not cause any symptoms often does not require any treatment. However a 'lump' in the area around the vagina should always be reported to your doctor and examined by them.

A Bartholin's abscess usually requires treatment as it can be very painful. Antibiotics may help in the early stages but a small procedure is often needed to drain it. The main aim of treatment is to remove the pus (to treat the abscess) and to create a new opening or duct to prevent another blockage.

There are two ways to treat the abscess:

1. Bartholin's gland balloon (Word catheter): performed under local anaesthetic
2. Marsupialisation: performed under general anaesthetic

The Bartholin's gland balloon (Word catheter)

The Word catheter is a thin rubber tube 3cm long with an inflatable balloon at one end. A small local anaesthetic injection is given to numb the skin and make the procedure more comfortable. A small cut is made in the cyst or abscess and the fluid is drained. The catheter is then inserted and the balloon is inflated to keep the catheter in place for 2 - 4 weeks.

The Word catheter stops the opening from closing up, so that a new duct can form over the catheter. Keeping the new duct open helps to allow normal secretions from the Bartholin's gland to escape, which can help to prevent blockages.

Marsupialisation

In some circumstances it may not be possible to perform a procedure under local anaesthetic. In these cases 'marsupialisation' is recommended, which is performed under a general anaesthetic.



Marsupialisation involves making a small cut in the cyst or abscess, draining the fluid or pus and then placing some dissolvable stitches around the edges to allow the new opening to heal. This allows any remaining fluid or pus to drain freely. It also allows the normal secretions of the Bartholin's gland to drain and helps to prevent a cyst or abscess forming again.

Sometimes a small gauze dressing is used, which is left in the duct following this operation to help healing. You will be told if this has been used and when it needs to be removed.

Risks

The risk of complications during treatment of a Bartholin's cyst or abscess is very small. Risks to be aware of include:

- Discomfort where the small cut is made (and where stitches are placed in the case of marsupialisation)
- Infection – increasing redness, inflammation or pain around the area or feeling feverish and unwell. You will be given antibiotics to help treat the abscess, which greatly reduces the risk of infection
- Bleeding – from the small cut made in the skin
- Bruising – around the abscess
- Recurrence of the cyst or abscess

If you are concerned about any of the above or feel unwell following your procedure, telephone the ward via the hospital's switchboard or see your GP.

Recovery

You may be sent home with a course of antibiotics and painkillers to take. It is important to keep the area clean and dry to help it heal. We advise washing with warm water and avoiding soaps and gels.

Bartholin gland balloon (Word catheter)

While the catheter is in place it is ok to go about normal daily activities. You may find warm baths are helpful if there is any discomfort. You should avoid tampons and intercourse while the catheter is in place.

If the catheter falls out, do not worry. Contact the ward for further advice. Most women find the treatment still works even if the catheter has fallen out.

You will be given an appointment to return to the clinic in 2 weeks, where the catheter will be removed. Some women may need the catheter in for a further 1 or 2 weeks. You may notice a small amount of discharge or bleeding for a couple of days from the site of the balloon catheter. You are recommended to rest for a day.

Marsupialisation

Before you go home you will be seen by a doctor who will explain how the procedure went, check that you are well enough to go home and answer any questions. The medicines in a general anaesthetic can stay in your system for several hours and can affect your reaction times and judgement. After a general anaesthetic:

- You must not drive or operate machinery (including cooker/oven) for the following 24 hours
- You should have somebody with you for the following 24 hours
- You should avoid alcohol in the following 24 hours
- You should rest and take things easy until you are feeling fully recovered
- You should not make important decisions or sign legal documents

Once you get home, the following steps can help:

- sitting in a warm soothing bath
- keeping the area clean by regular use of a bath, shower or bidet
- using a cool hair dryer instead of a towel for drying

Dissolvable stitches are applied to the skin during the surgery. These stitches usually fall out after 10 days. If you are worried about your wound in any way or the stitches don't fall out as they should, please go to your GP for advice.

Recurrence

Unfortunately the Bartholin's gland duct can become blocked again, which can lead to another Bartholin's cyst or abscess. This might mean that treatment needs to be repeated. The catheter has been approved as a treatment for Bartholin's abscesses and the risk of another abscess developing is low with this treatment.



Health
Nepean Blue Mountains
Local Health District

PO Box 63
Penrith NSW 2751
Telephone: (02) 4734 2000
Fax: (02) 4734 3737

Web: www.nbmlhd.health.nsw.gov.au
Email: NBMLHD-mail@health.nsw.gov.au
Facebook: www.facebook.com/NBMLHD
Twitter: @NBMLHD
YouTube: Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health District