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About Vulvar Cancer

Get an overview of vulvar cancer and the latest key statistics in the US.

Overview and Types

If you've been diagnosed with vulvar cancer or are worried about it, you likely have a lot of questions. Learning some basics is a good place to start.

- [What Is Vulvar Cancer?](#)

Research and Statistics

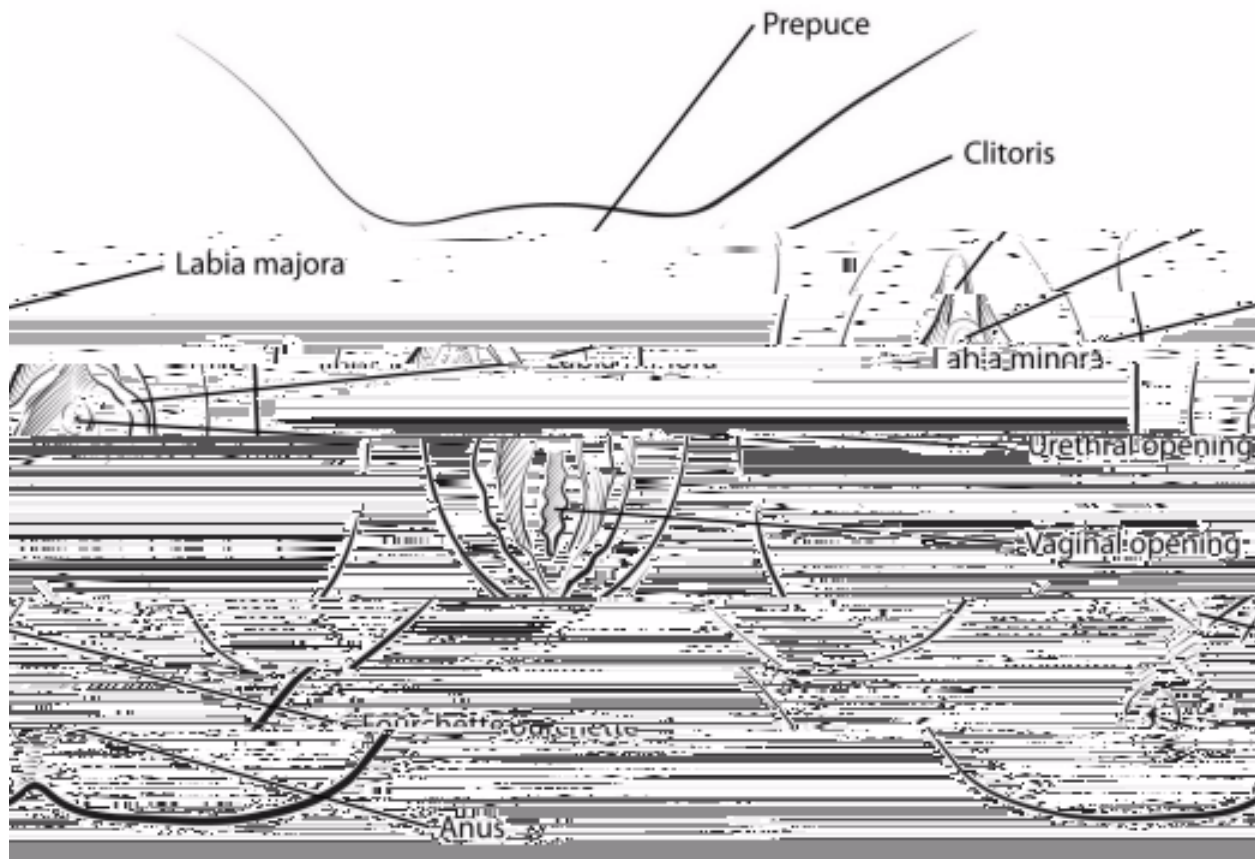
See the latest estimates for new cases of vulvar cancer and deaths in the US and what research is currently being done.

- [Key Statistics for Vulvar Cancer](#)
- [What's New in Vulvar Cancer Research and Treatment?](#)

What Is Vulvar Cancer?

- [Types of vulvar cancer](#)

The vulva is the outer part of the female genitals. The vulva includes the opening of the vagina (sometimes called the vestibule), the labia majora (outer lips), the labia minora (inner lips), and the clitoris.



Around the opening of the vagina, there are 2 sets of skin folds. The inner set, called the **labia minora**, are small and hairless. The outer set, the **labia majora**, are larger, with hair on the outer surface.

Types of vulvar cancer

Cancer starts when cells in the body begin to grow out of control. Cells in nearly any part of the body can become cancer, and can spread to other areas of the body. To learn more about how cancers start and spread, see [What Is Cancer?](#)¹

Squamous cell carcinomas

Most cancers of the vulva are squamous cell carcinomas. This type of cancer starts in squamous cells, the main type of skin cells. There are several subtypes of squamous cell carcinoma:

- The keratinizing type is most common. It usually develops in older women and is not linked to infection with human papilloma virus (HPV) (HPV is discussed in [Risk Factors for Vulvar Cancer](#)²).
- Basaloid and warty types are less common. These are the kinds more often found in younger women with HPV infections.
- Verrucous carcinoma is an uncommon subtype that's important to recognize because it's slow-growing and tends to have a good prognosis (outlook). This cancer looks like a large wart and a biopsy is needed to be sure it's not a benign (non-cancer) growth.

Adenocarcinoma

Cancer that starts in gland cells is called adenocarcinoma. About 8 of every 100 vulvar cancers are adenocarcinomas. Vulvar adenocarcinomas most often start in cells of the Bartholin glands. These glands are found just inside the opening of the vagina. A Bartholin gland cancer is easily mistaken for a cyst (build-up of fluid in the gland), so it's common to take awhile to get an accurate diagnosis. Most Bartholin gland cancers are adenocarcinomas. Adenocarcinomas can also form in the sweat glands of the vulvar skin.

Paget disease of the vulva is a condition in which adenocarcinoma cells are found in the top layer of the vulvar skin. Up to 25% of patients with vulvar Paget disease also have an invasive vulvar adenocarcinoma (in a Bartholin gland or sweat gland). In the remaining patients, the cancer cells are found only in the skin's top layer and have not grown into the tissues below.

Melanoma

Melanomas are cancers that start in the pigment-producing cells that give skin color. They are much more common on sun-exposed areas of the skin, but can start in other areas, such as the vulva. Vulvar melanomas are rare, making up about 6 of every 100 vulvar cancers.

More information on this can be found in [Melanoma Skin Cancer](#)³.

Sarcoma

A sarcoma is a cancer that starts in the cells of bones, muscles, or connective tissue. Less than 2 of every 100 vulvar cancers are sarcomas. Unlike other cancers of the vulva, vulvar sarcomas can occur in females at any age, including in childhood.

Basal cell carcinoma

Basal cell carcinoma, the most common type of skin cancer, is more often found on sun-exposed areas of the skin. It occurs very rarely on the vulva. For more information on this type of cancer, see [Basal and Squamous Cell Skin Cancer](#)⁴.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/understanding-cancer/what-is-cancer.html
 2. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vulvar-cancer/causes-risks-prevention/risk-factors.html
 3. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/melanoma-skin-cancer.html
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Key Statistics for Vulvar Cancer

Oncogenes and tumor suppressor genes

radioactive material right into the tumor. It's already used to treat other types of cancer, and women with certain vulvar tumors might benefit from it, too. More research is needed to find out if and when this treatment might improve treatment outcomes.

Identifying lymph nodes

Another area of interest is lymph node mapping. Vulvar cancer can spread to lymph nodes in the groin. Better ways to look for this spread and identify nodes with cancer might help doctors treat these nodes and decrease the risk of cancer coming back there. It could also allow them to save the healthy nodes and decrease the risk of long-term swelling in the groin and legs, called [lymphedema](#)⁷.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/understanding-cancer/genes-and-cancer.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/targeted-therapy.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vulvar-cancer/treating/surgery.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vulvar-cancer/treating/radiation-therapy.html
5. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vulvar-cancer/treating/chemotherapy.html
6. www.cancer.org/cancer/diagnosis-staging/lymph-nodes-and-cancer.html
7. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/swelling/lymphedema.html
8. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/vulvar-cancer/references.html

References

[See all references for Vulvar Cancer](#)

Palisoul ML, Mullen MM, Feldman R, Thaker PH. Identification of molecular targets in vulvar cancers. *Gynecol Oncol*. 2017;146(2):305-313.

Rao YJ, Hui C, Chundury A, et al. Which patients with inoperable vulvar cancer may benefit from brachytherapy in addition to external beam radiation? *Adlt al. Wh2Cveilly*

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