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Vulvar Cancer - Overview [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 08/2015

ON THIS PAGE: You will find some basic information about this disease and the parts of the body it may affect. This is the first page of Cancer.Net's Guide to Vulvar Cancer. To see other pages, use the menu on the side of your screen. Think of that menu as a roadmap to this full guide.

About the vulva

The vulva is a woman's external genitalia and is made up of the skin and fatty tissue that surround the clitoris and the openings of the vagina and urethra. The fatty tissue makes up two folds, called the labia majora and labia minora. Cancer of the vulva occurs most often in or on the labia. Less frequently, it can occur on the clitoris or in glands on the sides of the vaginal opening, called the Bartholin's glands, which produce a mucus-like lubricating fluid.

About vulvar cancer

Cancer begins when healthy cells change and grow uncontrollably, forming a mass called a tumor. A tumor can be cancerous or benign. A cancerous tumor is malignant, meaning it can grow and spread to other parts of the body. A benign tumor means the tumor can grow but will not spread.

Vulvar cancer is classified into three main types, named for the type of tissue where the cancer started.

- **Squamous cell carcinoma.** Squamous cell carcinoma is a type of [skin cancer](#) [3] that accounts for about 90% of vulvar cancer, most of which are found on the labia. It can

develop through a precancerous condition, which is when changes in cells may, but do not always, become cancer. This is called vulvar dysplasia or vulva intraepithelial neoplasia (VIN). VIN is a pre-malignant (not yet cancer) growth of cells on the vulva and is treated differently than invasive cancer.

- **Adenocarcinoma.** Adenocarcinoma starts in the Bartholin's glands or vulvar sweat glands, and accounts for a small percentage of vulvar cancer. It is usually found on the sides of the vaginal opening.
- **Melanoma.** [Melanoma](#) [4] is another type of skin cancer that accounts for about 2% to 4% of vulvar cancer. It occurs most often on the clitoris or the labia minora. Women with melanoma on other parts of their body have an increased risk of developing vulvar melanoma. Vulvar melanoma is often treated using similar approaches for the treatment of melanoma in other parts of the body.

Other, less common vulvar cancers include:

- Paget's disease of the vulva, in which adenocarcinoma cells are found in the vulvar skin
- [Sarcoma](#) [5], a tumor of the connective tissue beneath the skin
- Verrucous carcinoma, a slow-growing subtype of squamous cell carcinoma that looks like a wart

The [next section in this guide is Statistics](#) [6] and it helps explain how many women are diagnosed with this disease and general survival rates. Or, use the menu on the side of your screen to choose another section to continue reading this guide.

Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/cancer-types/vulvar-cancer/overview>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31378>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31265>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31379>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/19714>