

What is Vaginal Intraepithelial Neoplasia (VaIN)?

Vaginal Intraepithelial Neoplasia (VaIN) is a skin disease in which abnormal cells occur in the skin of the vagina.

Va	Vaginal	VaIN may occur anywhere on the vagina and in more than one place at a time.
I	Intra-epithelial	This means the disease is limited to the skin and does not go any deeper.
N	Neoplasia	The cells in the skin are abnormal.

VaIN occurs in different stages:

- VaIN 1: mildly abnormal changes in the skin cells (mild dysplasia)
- VaIN 2: moderately abnormal changes in the skin cells (moderate dysplasia)
- VaIN 3: severely abnormal changes in the skin cells (severe dysplasia)
- Cancer: if the abnormal cells go deeper than the skin, this is called “invasive” (or cancer).

Most women are diagnosed with VaIN 3.

VaIN is not cancer. If it is not treated, VaIN may get better, stay the same or get worse.

If you took a group of 100 women with VaIN3 who did not have any treatment, then probably 1 or 2 would develop cancer each year.

What causes VaIN?

VaIN is most commonly caused by certain types of the human papillomavirus (HPV). These “high risk” types of HPV can cause abnormal cells or even cancer in the cervix, vagina, vulva or anus.

➤ There are other, “low risk” types of HPV that can cause warts or even verrucas. Warts are very common and having warts does not mean you are at increased risk of having cancer.

Most women will probably come into contact with HPV infection at some point in their life. It is spread by skin to skin contact.

➤ If the virus enters the skin, the body’s own immune system may fight off the infection and you would never know that you have had it. If the virus is not cleared it may cause abnormal cells and eventually cancer.

Some cases of VaIN are not caused by HPV infection. They may be associated with previous radiotherapy.

What does it feel like?

There are often no symptoms at all. Sex may be very painful or even impossible. It is common to feel upset, angry and guilty.

How is VaIN diagnosed?

VaIN is usually diagnosed when no other cause can be found for an abnormal smear. The abnormal cells from the vagina are picked up by the cervix and then show up on a smear test. The only way to be sure if the skin is affected by VaIN is to take a small biopsy. This can often be done in the clinic, with local anaesthetic.

➤ The sample of skin is sent to the lab to check for abnormal cells (neoplasia). It will check that there is no cancer present by checking that the abnormal cells are limited to the skin (intraepithelial) and do not go any deeper. The results of the biopsy will be available in about 2-3 weeks.

Can I get it anywhere else?

The same condition on the cervix is called Cervical Intraepithelial Neoplasia (CIN). This is much more common than VaIN. CIN is detected by having regular smear tests.

It may also affect the in the vulva (VIN) or the anal canal (AIN).

How is VaIN treated?

The treatment for VaIN will depend on where the disease is, how widespread it is and what problems it is causing. Options include:

- Conservative management. There is a very small risk of a cancer developing. You would be closely followed up, so that any cancer could be picked up early. This would then be treated with radiotherapy.
- Treatment with imiquimod. This is used for treating VIN, where it has about a 50% success rate. We do not know what the success rate in the vagina is. See leaflet on Imiquimod for VAIN for more details.
- Surgery. For small single lesions this may be useful. However, it may also be extensive and involve removing the entire vagina, so is rarely used in this situation.

What can I do to help myself?

Giving up smoking may reduce the risk of VaIN coming back after treatment.

How often will I be seen?

You will usually be seen in clinic with the results of your biopsy. The options for treatment will be discussed.

VaIN is a condition that may come back after treatment. Following successful treatment you will need to be seen every six months or every year in clinic.

In a very few women with VaIN, a vaginal cancer may occur. It is therefore very important that if you notice any lumps or unusual bleeding you should contact the hospital for an urgent appointment or consult your own doctor immediately. You should not wait for your next appointment.

Why have I got VaIN?

VaIN occurs in women of all ages, often between the ages of 30 and 50 years old.

It is not caused by lack of cleanliness

It is not due to promiscuity

➤ VaIN is more common in women who have reduced immunity, for example after having a kidney transplant, or because they are affected by HIV. Smoking may slightly reduce your immunity and increases your risk of VaIN.

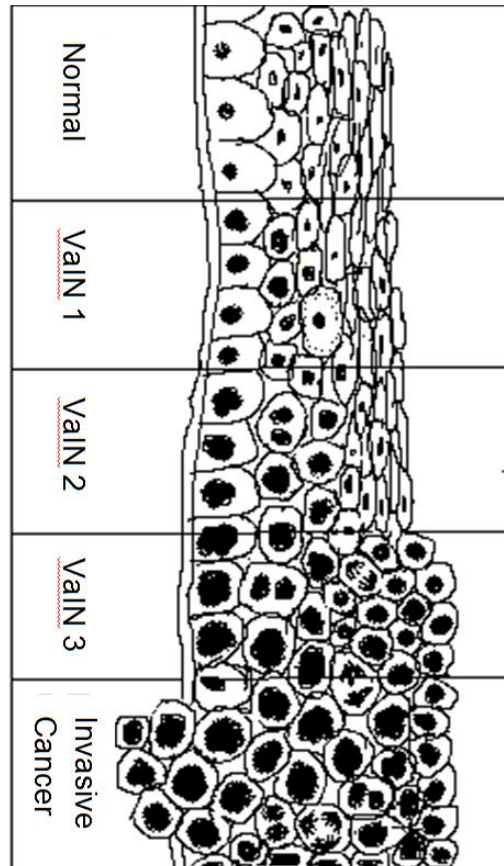
Most women with VaIN do not have any other medical problems.

Is there anyone I can contact for further information?

There is a large amount of information available on the internet. As VaIN is not common, not all of the information is accurate or up to date. If you put VaIN into a "Google search" you will find a large variety of information. If this raises any questions, please feel free to write them down and ask when you come to the clinic.

Macmillan have information about VaIN on their website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Diagram of the vaginal skin



Vaginal Intraepithelial Neoplasia (VaIN)

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