



genital surgery

intimate issues

Adelaide gynaecologist and pelvic reconstructive surgeon **Dr Oseka Onuma** explains laser vaginal rejuvenation. Lauren Alexander reports.

As women become more aware that it is possible to correct potentially embarrassing problems, female genital surgery is increasing in popularity. 'There is a growing demand for these types of procedures. They can increase a woman's confidence in herself and her relationships as well as her overall quality of life,' says Adelaide gynaecologist and pelvic reconstructive surgeon Dr Oseka Onuma.

'These days women are less willing to accept changes in genital anatomy resulting from pregnancy, childbirth and ageing. They are less likely to have the attitude "it's just part of being a woman",' he says.

The kinds of problems women may suffer from are varied, explains Dr Onuma. They include protrusions or a lump within the vagina, scar tissue, discomfort, or sagging at the entrance to the vagina. Oversized, elongated or asymmetrical labia minora – the inner vaginal lips which surround the entrance to the vagina – can cause irritation and discomfort when wearing certain clothes or during activities such as bicycle and horse riding or engaging in sexual intercourse.

Loose or weak vaginal muscles, which are mainly caused by the muscles being stretched during childbirth, can create problems for some women and their partners, especially during sexual intercourse.

'Childbirth can change the shape and tone of vaginal tissue, sometimes resulting in embarrassment as well as loss of sexual satisfaction,' Dr Onuma says.

According to Dr Onuma, women also often identify an

apparent problem with their labia early in their teenage years or notice gradual changes with thickening as well as elongation over time.

Another problem is female stress urinary incontinence, caused predominantly by an improperly functioning urethra. When a woman suffers from this condition, weakened muscle and pelvic tissue don't adequately support the urethra. As a result, the urethra doesn't maintain a tight seal during exercise or exertion such as coughing or laughing and urine may escape.

'Beyond pelvic floor retraining and physiotherapy, there is now a range of minimal-access surgical options available that can address and hopefully resolve these problems,' says Dr Onuma.

Laser vaginal rejuvenation (LVR) can enhance vaginal muscle tone, strength and control. According to Dr Onuma, the laser techniques deliver gentle precision procedures with controlled accuracy and result in rapid healing, less pain, better recovery, less scarring and allow improved sensation and resumption of daily activities in a relatively short period of time.

The procedure is performed in a fully accredited hospital to monitor any discomfort. After the procedure, the amount of time away from work depends on the type of work the patient does. 'An office worker could return to work after two weeks; someone doing more physical work such as lifting or remaining on their feet for long periods normally returns to work after four to six weeks,' he says. Total healing of surface and connective tissues along with damaged muscle may take six weeks.

Most patients report mild discomfort which can be controlled by analgesics and cold packs to the area during the first week after the operation.

Dr Onuma says LVR is a procedure with a relatively low risk, provided the surgeon is skilled and experienced. As with any surgery, the risks are haemorrhage and infection, and these are less than 1 percent. 'To put this in perspective, pregnancy is associated with far more risk than vaginal rejuvenation procedures,' he says.

Laser reduction labioplasty can sculpt an elongated or unequal labial minora according to the patient's wishes. 'There is a wide variation in the appearance of the external genitalia, so no one look is normal,' Dr Onuma says.

'The procedure can create a more aesthetically appealing vulva,' he says. 'The vulvar structures (including the labia minora, labia majora, mons pubis, perineum, entrance to the vagina and hymen) can be surgically enhanced, both functionally and aesthetically.'

Prior to any surgery there must be a thorough discussion between the surgeon and the patient about the operation techniques and likely outcomes. 'No woman should suffer embarrassment or feel inhibited in her relationship with her partner due to the appearance of her vagina or physical sexual dysfunction,' Dr Onuma says. 'Engaging in a frank discussion with her gynaecologist is the first step to alleviating her anxieties.' **acsm**

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