

VAGINA IN PANIC

For women with vaginismus, sex can be a nightmare.

WORDS BRIANNA SHAWHAN

PHOTO BEN CURTIS



Danielle Sato has no idea what good sex feels like. For her, sex is always painful. “It’s hard to fathom that when you have sex it could possibly hurt,” Sato says. “We’re kind of conditioned to believe that once it’s in, it’s supposed to feel good.” Her pain is caused by vaginismus, a disorder that makes sex painful—sometimes even impossible—no matter how much you want to get it on.

According to the Mayo Clinic, vaginismus is caused by involuntary spasms of the vaginal muscles that makes penetration painful. If intercourse is possible, it can feel like painful burning or stinging. Sometimes penetration isn’t possible at all—then, the vagina may feel like it’s completely closed off. This sometimes prevents a woman from even using tampons.

LIVING WITH VAGINISMUS

Roughly two in 1,000 women are medically diagnosed with vaginismus, according to vaginismus.com. Sato, a 21-year-old from Oahu, Hawaii, is one of them. “I first noticed it when I lost my virginity,” Sato says. “I was 19. Up until then, I had minimal problems with tampons. My case is a little weird—I only have a hard time inserting my boyfriend’s penis.”

There isn’t one specific cause of vaginismus. Any number of things can trigger it, such as fear of intercourse, performance anxiety, emotional or sexual abuse, believing that sex is immoral or impure, or medical conditions including urinary tract infections, endometriosis, and cancer.

Sato attributes her vaginismus to poor sex education, which caused her to develop a fear of intercourse. “When I asked my mom about sex, I was like, ‘Mom, does it hurt?’ and she was like, ‘Of course it hurts—it’s the first time!’” Sato says. “My parents are very traditional. They never really talked to me about this kind of stuff, so I went in expecting it would be painful.”

Living with vaginismus makes dating difficult. While some women are able to carry on successful physical relationships without having penetrative sex, many others lose their significant others or avoid dating altogether. Sato has only been with one man since discovering her condition. They’ve dated about two years and have been trying to work through the pain. “When I found out about my vaginismus, it was kind of devastating,” Sato says. “My boyfriend and I hadn’t had sex for over seven or eight months. That’s when I got depressed. I just couldn’t keep forcing myself to have sex with him. For a while, I was in denial, and I just

wanted to keep up our relationship. He told me it doesn’t really matter, but sometimes I feel bad.”

DIAGNOSIS & TREATMENT

Vaginismus is a generally ignored disorder. There is no definite way to medically test for it, which often leads to misdiagnoses by medical professionals—some as ridiculous as attributing its cause to a too-small vagina. Because the pain often occurs just during intercourse, doctors can’t always find anything physically wrong during an exam, and brush off the problem. Sato’s doctor told her to use lube and try different positions—both of which seldom help women with the disorder. “My doctor told me I had no hymen left, so there was nothing physically impeding attempts at penetration,” Sato says. “Nothing changed, and I got depressed because she kept giving me the same advice.”

Once vaginismus is identified, there aren’t many places for women to seek treatment. But the clinics that do exist make it their mission to cure every woman they diagnose. The Women’s Therapy Center in Plainview, N.Y., has been treating vaginismus and other pain disorders since 1995 and has cured about 1,000 women. “We treat the disorder with a body and mind approach because we truly believe that vaginismus is the vagina in panic,” social worker Ross Tabisel says. “We offer a two-week program where women who live far away can come and be treated and cured.”

Because vaginismus is commonly caused by fear and anxiety, seeing a sex therapist has also proved useful for many women. Self-help kits have helped some women, too. To purchase a self-help kit (about \$100), visit vaginismus.com. For more information on the Women’s Therapy Center, check out womentc.com.

OTHER CAUSES OF SEXUAL PAIN

ENDOMETRIOSIS

This disorder occurs when cells from the uterine lining grow in other areas of the abdomen. Painful intercourse is a common symptom, as well as pain in the lower abdomen, pelvis, or back during a woman’s period. Endometriosis’s cause is unknown, but available treatments include medication, exercise, and surgery.

OVARIAN CYSTS AND TUMORS

All women have cysts on their ovaries. But if one becomes too large or a tumor forms, sexual pain can occur. Birth control reduces the size of cysts, but some may require surgical removal. Surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation will treat cancerous tumors.

PELVIC INFLAMMATORY DISEASE (PID)

PID is an infection of the female reproductive organs, such as the uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries. PID is most often caused by sexually transmitted diseases, such as chlamydia and gonorrhea. Treatments involve antibiotics or surgery.