



NVA News

Spring 2026

A Gentler Lidocaine

As you know, Lidocaine 5% is a widely prescribed temporary anesthetic that vulvodynia sufferers apply to the vestibule shortly before having sex. A substantial number of women, however, report burning upon application, typically lasting 15 to 30 seconds (or up to two minutes in some women).

At a recent NVA meeting, Board member Kathy Polletto said that her ob/gyn prescribed Lidocaine with an Ellage base, an alternative Lidocaine that doesn't burn. Ellage, formulated for sensitive skin, is self-emulsifying and muco-adhesive, ideal for the mucosa of the vulvar vestibule. A compounding pharmacist combines 5% Lidocaine HCl and an Ellage base, creating a non-irritating and quickly absorbed gel.

If you experience burning with Lidocaine and your health care provider agrees to prescribe this alternative, ask for the name of a reputable compounding pharmacy in your area.

eSense-Vulvodynia

Strong evidence supports the use of mindfulness and cognitive behavioral techniques (CBT) for increasing women's satisfaction with sexual relationships. Both mindfulness and CBT are the basis for eSense, a self-guiding online program that has produced positive results in women lacking sexual desire or experiencing distress in their sexual relationships. The program is a combination of text, audio and video, and includes patient stories and practical exercises.

In 2025, Lori Brotto, Ph.D., a longtime advocate in women's sexual health at the University of British Columbia, proposed adapting eSense for women with vulvodynia. Since eSense is

a complementary therapy that is user-friendly and available at home, NVA's board of directors awarded a modest grant for Dr. Brotto to modify eSense. She has asked a group of women with Provoked Vestibulodynia (PVD) to describe their most concerning sexual issues. The next step is to identify and adapt the sections of eSense that can be most useful to this group of women.

Once the eSense-Vulvodynia program is developed, Dr. Brotto will test its feasibility in 30 PVD patients. We expect to have her results by early 2027.

(Editor's note: If you are interested in the original version of eSense, you can access it at: <https://esensehealth.com/>.

NVA Awards Research Grants

In early March, the NVA executive board funded two new studies to accelerate the development of new vulvodynia treatments. The award recipients are Erin Carey, M.D., associate professor of ob/gyn, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and Elena Tonc, Ph.D., assistant professor of biology, Hamilton College in New York.

Dr. Carey's research will advance two complementary technologies: (i) a biodissolvable film with vulvar applicator and (ii) a live human tissue model of the vulvar vestibule. The purpose of the biodissolvable film and applicator is to improve delivery of topical treatment to the vulvar vestibule. The development of a live human tissue model of the vulvar vestibule will enable researchers to test new therapies faster. Many researchers initially use mice to test a new treatment, but it's unknown whether their findings can be replicated in humans. With a live human tissue model, we can eliminate animal studies and know whether we should test a treatment in women with vestibulodynia.

Prior research suggests that repeated exposure to certain chemicals can trigger changes in the immune system and lead to chronic vulvar pain. Dr. Tonc has shown that mice exposed to methylisothiazolinone (MI), a preservative in some personal care products, exhibit long-lasting sensitivity in the genital area. Her preliminary data also show an increase in pain-sensing neurons in the lumbar region of the spinal cord.

Dr. Tonc's NVA-funded study will examine mice that have been exposed to MI to determine whether neuroinflammatory changes in the peripheral tissue (vulva) and central nervous system (spinal cord) are permanent. She will also determine how the immune system contributes to these changes, by identifying the specific molecules, cells and processes involved. Her goal is to discover new therapeutic targets for vulvodynia.



Lady Parts: An Autobiographical Film

Never before has there been a movie like Lady Parts, a festival award-winning dramedy about a 31-year-old woman who moves in with her parents prior to having a vestibulectomy. Writer Bonnie Gross hopes that the film will empower women to start conversations about having pain in a part of their body that is taboo.

The film covers Gross' issues with her body and her relationship with her parents. Although the subject is serious, Gross uses humor at times to engage the audience. She thinks that women who don't suffer from vulvodynia or pelvic pain can relate to how her character re-evaluates what's important in life and learns to be comfortable in her own skin.

To find out where this film is showing, visit <https://ladypartsfilm.com/screenings>.

Study Participants Needed

Patients with provoked vestibulodynia (PVD) are needed to test the efficacy of PelvicSense, a virtual skills-based program to manage pelvic pain and possibly vulvodynia. In this randomized controlled trial, the control group waits six months to do the program. It is our hope that PelvicSense will help vulvodynia patients manage their pain at home.

If you experience pain and distress due to provoked vestibulodynia (PVD), you may be eligible for our new clinical trial of PelvicSense®



Seeking participants:

- Over the age of 18 years old
- Able to read/write in English
- Diagnosis of PVD
- Live in Canada or the USA
- Willing to answer questions about PVD, sexual wellbeing, and the PelvicSense Program

sex.lab.ca/participate



For more information visit [www.sex.lab.ca/participate](https://sex.lab.ca/participate) or email: gshrl@queensu.ca.

This study has received ethical approval by the Health Sciences and Affiliated Teaching Hospitals Research Ethics Board (HSREB)

Study Overview

- Potential participants complete a brief online eligibility screener (approximately 5 minutes)
- Eligible participants are invited to complete a phone screening interview (20–30 minutes)
- Participants then complete a baseline survey (approximately 30 minutes) and are randomized to receive the program either immediately or after a 6-month wait period
- Participants complete three brief check-in surveys (weeks 3, 6, and 9; 5–10 minutes each), as well as two longer surveys (approximately 30 minutes each) at the end of the program and three months later

Eligibility Criteria

Participants must:

- Have a healthcare provider diagnosis of provoked vestibulodynia
- Be 18 years of age or older
- Be able to read, speak, and write in English
- Currently reside in Canada or the United States
- Be willing to answer questions about PVD, sexual wellbeing, and their experience with the program

For more information please visit www.sexlab.ca/participate or email gshrl@queensu.ca.

This study has received ethical approval from the Queen's University Health Sciences and Affiliated Teaching Hospitals Research Ethics Board (HSREB).

Pelvic Health Fund

Kaitlyn Bachman, P.T., founded the non-profit Pelvic Health Fund (PHF) to provide vaginal dilators and other pelvic health products to women who can't afford them. PHF receives the names of eligible women from health care providers across the U.S. Since it's an all-volunteer group, donations pay for the pelvic supplies and the cost of mailing them. If you would like to learn more about PHF or make a donation, please visit pelvichealthfund.org.

[Support the NVA](#)

NVA funds critical research studies and promotes vulvodynia awareness, provides the latest information on treatments, establishes vulvar pain clinics and supervises support services for women with vulvodynia.

