

## Fact Sheet

Capsaicin is a natural extract from chilli peppers. It is the part of the chilli that gives the burning feeling in your mouth. So why would you put it on a sensitive area like your vulva? We all know how hot a curry can be. But we also know that people who eat curry every day get used to eating hot food and can eat chillis easily without discomfort. Their mouth becomes desensitized to the burning feeling. Something similar happens when capsaicin is put on painful vulval skin. The first time it is used, there is a sudden release of pain chemicals from nerves and a strong burning feeling. However, over time, when used regularly, the nerves release less and less of the pain chemicals, and the vulval skin becomes less sensitive.

### What to consider before using Capsaicin cream

Many women have vulval pain, but only a few are suitable for this treatment. Capsaicin is one treatment option for women with Provoked Vulvar Vestibulodynia. This means a vulva that is painful to touch in and near the opening of the vagina but where the skin looks completely normal, and skin conditions of the vulva have been excluded. It will not help skin conditions such as lichen sclerosis or candidiasis (thrush). Treatment with Capsaicin is painful and only for those who are determined, understand what is involved, and prepared to persist with treatment, even where this is painful. Before trying Capsaicin, it is ESSENTIAL to see a gynaecologist or vulval dermatologist (skin doctor) to ensure that all other causes of vulval pain have been excluded – and that more accessible ways of managing vulval pain have been tried. Ensure that any dermatitis or dry skin has been treated. To do this, avoid washing the genitals with soap. Apply a liquid and soft paraffin product such as Dermeze 1% ointment (available at a pharmacy without a prescription) to the vulva three times a day for three weeks to ensure that the vulval skin is in good condition.

### How do I use Capsaicin?

Capsaicin (Zostrix) can be bought from a chemist without a prescription. It comes in 2 strengths – a milder 0.25% cream and a stronger 0.75% cream. We recommend that you start with the mild 0.25% cream. Allergy to capsaicin (chilli) is rare. It is a food most of us eat at some time.

**It is OK to ignore the instructions on the tube that say 'do not apply to the genitals', but be careful not to get Zostrix in your eyes, nose or mouth.**

