# Denise Asks Awkward Questions – Itchy Vulvas

**Denise:** Hello everybody. I'm comedian Denise Scott, and welcome to Denise Asks Awkward Questions with Jean Hailes. My guest today is Louise Brown, Head of Public Health and Education at Jean Hailes. She gets thousands of questions each year from women who are confused, frustrated, or just plain angry about their healthcare. All right, it's time to get awkward.

We have a question here from Sian who lives in Geelong, Victoria. Sian says, "This is super embarrassing, but I have an itchy vulva. I went to a male GP and he refused to even do an exam, which made me feel really weird. How do I say 'Look at it'?"

**Louise:** I think this is actually not that uncommon to be honest.

**Denise:** Really? No!

**Louise:** No. Look, I, I mean this is, I don't want this to sound like this is all GPs, but certainly there are probably some GPs that are not as comfortable... well doing the intimate examinations of women. And we also know that women aren't necessarily that keen to show their vulva and vagina and stuff to the GP as well.

And women tend to, if they've got a vulval itch, they'll just go down to the chemist and get some cream for thrush and treat it themselves. But the problem is that it's not always thrush that causes the itch, and it's really important that the vulva examination happens in case it's an infection or it's an allergy or something like that. So it is really, really good for the doctor to look at the vulva and do a proper examination in case they need to do a swab or something.

But we know that this has happened quite a lot and we've actually written a booklet called The Vulva, funnily enough.

**Denise:** Look out!

**Louise:** And it's really, the idea is to encourage women to have their vulva looked at. If it's not better, go and see the GP, and it's okay to be assertive. It's okay to say, "This has been bothering me for months, I can't function because it's itching so much. I really need you to have a look, please."

**Denise:** This is astounding to me that a GP can't look at your vulva. Although, you know when my mum, who's died quite a few years ago and she had Alzheimer's and was still living at home and she had a prolapse occur and I called a doctor to the house and yeah, he sent me in! He went in, had a quick look, came out and said, you go in. And I'm like looking at my mother's prolapse, the last thing I wanted to see in my lifetime, and then I had to call an ambulance because he just wouldn't deal with it.

**Louise:** I might just explain what a prolapse is.

**Denise:** Oh yeah. I wish you... please.

**Louise:** It's a kind of a tricky idea, but it's when one or more of the organs inside the pelvis, like the bladder or something like that, pushes down into the vagina so the muscle walls are not strong and it falls down almost inside the vagina, and sometimes it can actually come outside the body.

**Denise:** Yes...

**Louise:** So, yeah, it's...

**Denise:** ...it certainly can. And that's one hell of an image.

So with tricky situations where you do have a doctor who can't deal with it, best to see a female doctor, or?

**Louise:** I think some female GPs often end up with lots of women patients for this very reason because women feel more comfortable and I think the doctors sometimes feel more comfortable. There's plenty of fantastic male GPs out there, but I think what's really important is, even though it's really hard, try not to be embarrassed. Because there really isn't many things that the GP hasn't seen before. So I know to you it's really tricky, but getting the help that you need is, is probably the thing to keep in mind.

**Denise:** Here's a question from Ness, from Campbelltown New South Wales. Ness asks, "Since I was 12, I've been told that period pain is normal, but I now take a packet of pain killers a month." So is that normal?

**Louise:** We're gonna bust a myth here. Period pain like that is not normal. If you've got period pain that is affecting your ability to work, go to school, play sport, and live your normal life, that's beyond normal and that's something that you definitely need to get help with.

I think we've probably... in days gone by, maybe mums have told daughters, oh, I always had terrible period pain, you are gonna have terrible period pain. But we know more than that now. We know that there are conditions that can cause really bad period pain, and it's important to get the right treatment for them.

**Denise:** Going to a GP, and talking about

**Louise:** it.

Yeah, yeah, I think so. And keeping a record of some of the symptoms that this person has would be really good. So writing down how many days of pain they're having and when's the pain coming. What it's stopping them doing. So that when they go to the GP, they can paint a picture of what's been going on for them and have that really good information.

So if period pain is stopping you from doing stuff, that's not okay, and that's something you really do need to get looked at. And taking a packet of painkillers a month? You know, that's, that's way too much and that's not something that anyone should be experiencing. So that needs discussion with a doctor.

**Denise:** Alright that's it for today. If I'm not here and you have more questions, go to jeanhailes.org.au. Bye everybody.

Information about Jean Hailes for Women’s Health

Jean Hailes for Women's Health is a national not-for-profit organisation dedicated to improving the health of all women, girls and gender-diverse people. For free, evidence-based and easy-to-understand health information, visit [www.jeanhailes.org.au](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au).

© 2023 Jean Hailes Foundation. All rights reserved. This publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part by any means without written permission of the copyright owner. Contact: [licensing@jeanhailes.org.au](mailto:licensing@jeanhailes.org.au)