# Episode 6 – Hello lubricant!

**Announcer:** This conversation has been made possible by the New South Wales Government's Menopause Awareness Campaign.

**Sarah White:** Hello and welcome. I'm your host Sarah White from Jean Hailes for Women's Health. When people think of menopause, they think of hot flushes, but there are so many other symptoms. In this series, we hear from you the things that are bothering you, the things that are confusing, and things you didn't know were symptoms at all.

Join us as we work through the Menopause Symptom Checklist.

I am joined today by GP Dr. Sara Whitburn from Sexual Health Victoria. Today's question is one that nobody talks about.

**Listener Question:** My partner and I have a great relationship, but she wants to have sex less often. When we do have sex, she says it can be painful. Is this just a sign of getting older?

**Sarah White:** So I think there's a couple of things there, doesn't want to have sex and then painful sex. What would you say to that, Dr. Sara?

**Dr. Sara Whitburn:** So, I don't think we can put either of those down to just getting older. I wanna start first with that idea about not wanting to have sex as much. So the way that we feel about sex, the, the desire we have or how much we enjoy it or how much we're looking forward to is often called ‘libido’.

And libido can change throughout our lifetime. And it can also change during our relationships as well. So often when we start in a relationship, our libido's really high. It's all really exciting. It's new. And then as we go into longer-term relationships, it doesn't always happen, but we often see a pattern where, you start to have a change and you're feeling a bit more companionable and perhaps your desire to have sex drops off anyway.

**Sarah White:** And that can just be life getting in the way I presume?

**Dr. Sara Whitburn:** It can be. Libido is impacted by lots of different things, and one of the things is life or stress. All the things that happen to us in our life can impact on how we feel about wanting to have sex. When we get to the menopause, you add into those usual changes that there's also changes in hormones, and so that can then impact on the desire to have sex.

What it can also do is, and they're talking about painful sex, is the change in hormones unfortunately affect our vulva, our vagina, and the skin around those areas. And what we find is that the skin can become more fragile, the skin gets drier, there's less lubrication. And so if you have sex, it can become painful.

**Sarah White:** So this is penetrative sex we're talking about.

**Dr. Sara Whitburn:** Yeah, so anything where there is perhaps something that goes in the vagina. So whether that be penis-in-vaginal sex, fingers or toys, sometimes the skin can become so fragile even what I like to call ‘outercourse’ can be painful. So that's any other touch that might be around those areas as well.

**Sarah White:** And what advice do you normally give to people who are experiencing this sort of issue? It's really hard.

**Dr. Sara Whitburn:** It is really hard. So the first thing I would do is just say, you know, it's a safe space, and are you having any problems in your relationship? Are you having any problems with how you feel around sex?

Because I really wanna make sure the person in front of me is feeling that they can talk about it and that we can talk about options. It's about communication. The other thing to talk about, and we did talk about the changes in the vulval skin and the vaginal skin, it is also a time that we can talk about how we can improve lubrication and improve those symptoms of menopause in vulval and vaginal area.

So there's quite a range of different types of lubrication and certain ones are better depending on your situation. So for example, if you're still using condoms, you wanna use a water-based lubricant. If that's not the case for you, you might use an oil or a silicon-based lubricant. But just be aware that, for example, if you're using silicon based toys, silicon lubricant’s not, not great there. So it's getting to know these lubricants and you can buy them at chemists, supermarkets, but also online there's, there's plenty of reputable online stores.

**Sarah White:** So it can be quite discreet about ordering something.

**Dr. Sara Whitburn:** Absolutely. The other thing I'd talk about is, you know, we've talked about some of the things you can do for your own self-care. There is also vaginal estrogen, so that's a type of ointment or type of tablet that goes in the vagina that can be prescribed, which can be helpful if symptoms are severe.

So as we've talked about some of the things you can do yourself, but once again, if symptoms are severe and things are really impacting on you, do talk to your GP because there are some other prescription treatments that might be appropriate and safe for you.

**Sarah White:** It must be really important for you as a GP to talk about, that women don't feel comfortable talking about sex and yet we really do have to, don't we? Especially around menopause.

**Dr. Sara Whitburn:** It is, and we know that people wanna be asked and they wanna be asked by their health professionals. So it's on us to have some really lovely, open questions. And it doesn't have to be, you know, diving straight into, ‘How do you feel about sex?’

It can be, ‘How are things at home, how are things with you? Is there anything that's concerning you?’ So, people are really keen to tell their stories, maybe we just have to open the door to let people tell them to us.

**Sarah White:** And so as a patient sitting in front of a doctor who's wondering how to start this conversation, this could be where your checklist comes in, where you can just tick a box and the GP knows to start having that little bit of conversation with you.

**Dr. Sara Whitburn:** Absolutely. You don't even have to come up with any words. I mean, if you see me, I'm gonna be asking, but—

**Sarah White:** I'd love to!

**Dr. Sara Whitburn:** —but for, but for other people, it's a great way just to slide that across the desk, and there it is. It's on, it's on the table.

**Sarah White:** That's it from us today. We know menopause can be tough, but it's worse when you don't talk about it. To support conversations with your doctor, your colleagues, your family and friends, you can download the Menopause Symptoms Checklist on the Jean Hailes for Women's Health website and the New South Wales Menopause Toolkit.

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Information about the podcast

This podcast series has been made possible by the NSW Government's Menopause Awareness Campaign. For help talking about menopause, download the [Perimenopause and Menopause Symptom Checklist](https://www.jeanhailes.org.au/resources/perimenopause-and-menopause-symptom-checklist) and take it with you to your next medical appointment. For more information visit: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/women-nsw/toolkits-and-resources/perimenopause-and-menopause-toolkit>

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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).

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