

Genital Health for Women

Taking care of your vulva and vagina

Many women feel uncomfortable talking about or looking at their genital area and as a result are unsure of the difference between their vulva and vagina.

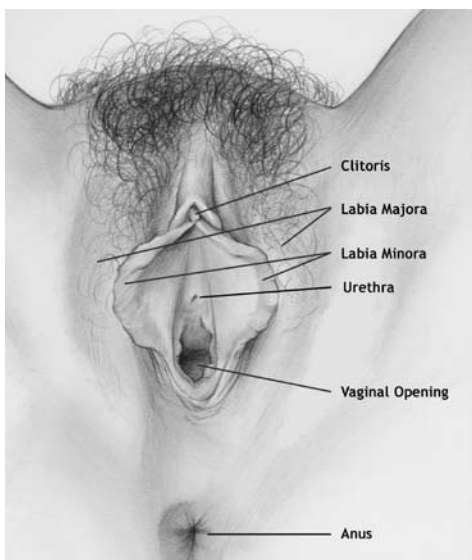
The vulva is the external part of the female genital area, which includes the labia majora and labia minora (inner and outer lips), clitoris, urethra and vaginal opening.

The vagina is a muscular tube which leads from the vulva to the cervix, the lowest part of the uterus (womb).

The fact that the genital area is not easy to see also makes it difficult for women to easily identify the different parts. It can be useful to have a look with a mirror if you are unsure about your genital area.

Secretions from the cervix and the glands at the entrance of the vagina help to keep it clean and healthy. These secretions vary during the menstrual cycle and are part of a normal, healthy vagina. Fluid also passes through the vaginal walls in response to physical activity and sexual arousal.

All these secretions make up the vaginal discharge and fluid that a woman normally notices. Usually discharge is whitish, drying yellowish on underwear, and varying in amount throughout the month. It has a characteristic (but not bad) smell unnoticeable to you or others if you shower or wash regularly.



The Female Vulva

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Maintaining healthy genitals

The skin of the female genital area is especially sensitive and needs protection from physical damage and certain chemicals.

Keep the vulva dry and well aired by:

- wearing only plain, loose-fitting cotton underwear and changing it daily
- changing out of damp bathing suits or exercise clothing as soon as possible
- changing pads and tampons regularly (check the packaging instructions if unsure about time length)
- avoiding tight-fitting clothes, g-strings, panty-hose and synthetic materials next to the skin
- avoiding long exposure to hot, sweaty or chafing conditions, eg sauna, aerobics

Irritation to the vulva can be avoided by:

- not using soaps or antiseptics – use plain water or a soap alternative such as Cetaphil, Dermaveen or Hamilton QV wash to wash the area
- not using perfumed deodorants or talcs near the vulva
- not using perfumed pads and tampons
- using soft, unperfumed toilet paper
- not over-washing the area (once a day is sufficient) and patting it dry after washing, rather than rubbing with a towel

If you are experiencing vulval irritation you should:

- make sure that all clothing in contact with the vulva has been rinsed well so no washing detergent remains, and avoid fabric softener on underwear
- wash the genitals gently in plain, cool water. Burning and irritation can be relieved by cool washes or salt baths (2 teaspoons table salt per litre of water)
- avoid getting shampoo on the vulva, and avoid using bath gels and bubble baths
- avoid panty liners and use only 100% cotton tampons and pads
- avoid sex when you have pain, or consider alternatives to painful intercourse, such as oral sex. Avoid using lubricants such as KY jelly if these increase irritation. Light vegetable oil can be useful as a lubricant for sex, but will cause damage to condoms, dams and diaphragms. Sometimes semen can be very irritating, so condoms or ejaculation outside the vagina can be helpful
- avoid scratching as it can damage vulval skin and make itching worse. Reduce itching with cool washes and compresses. Don't rub the area with toilet paper, just pat gently dry with unperfumed paper
- limit exercises that can irritate the area, such as horse and bike riding
- avoid shaving or waxing the genital area

Common genital problems

Vaginal problems

A variety of bacteria, yeasts and other micro-organisms occur naturally in the vagina. Specific bacteria (lactobacilli) normally keep the vagina slightly acidic, keeping the growth of other bacteria under control.

The vaginal balance can be upset by external factors. This can lead to a change in the balance of the natural bacteria in the vagina, causing problems. Some women are more prone than others to disturbance of the vaginal environment.

A course of antibiotics may reduce the numbers of bacteria that the vagina needs to keep its normal acidic balance. Stress, illness and hormone changes can also alter the vaginal environment.

Signs of a vaginal problem may be:

- itching, irritation or soreness around the vaginal opening
- a burning sensation when urinating
- increased or unusual discharge
- swelling of the labia
- abnormal bleeding
- uncomfortable or painful sex
- an unpleasant odour

If you are experiencing any of the above problems, see a doctor.

Genital itch

Genital itch is a common problem among women. Many assume that any genital itch is due to thrush (see below for more information), but there are other conditions that can cause itching and soreness, such as eczema (dermatitis).

If you are experiencing persistent genital itch, it is important to see a doctor to get an accurate diagnosis, so that you can be given the right treatment.

Vulval pain

Vulval pain is a problem for many women, and can be caused by both physical and psychological factors. It can make inserting tampons or having sex difficult or impossible. Some women find the area too painful to even touch.

Some vulval problems have noticeable signs, such as a growth, sore or rash on the vulva. These can often indicate an infection or skin condition such as eczema or dermatitis, and need to be checked by a doctor.

Some women experiencing vulval pain have no other physical symptoms but experience pain some or all of the time, in particular when urinating or sitting for long periods. Because of the lack of other symptoms, these problems can be difficult to diagnose. Physical therapy is often used to treat vulval pain, but avoiding intercourse, wearing loose clothing and using cold packs can help. Your doctor may prescribe antidepressants or anti-epileptic medication to reduce the pain, or a special cream to apply to the area. Counselling or therapy may be beneficial if the pain is due to psychological causes.

Although not usually an indication of a serious condition, if you are experiencing recurring vulval pain it is important to see a doctor - don't try and treat the problem yourself. Occasionally however, pain can be related to conditions such as cancer.

Vaginal infections

You can help avoid vaginal infections by:

- wiping from front to back when using toilet paper
- being particularly careful with hygiene if you have a bowel upset e.g. washing rather than wiping
- eating a healthy, well balanced diet
- not douching (flushing liquids into the vagina)

Common vaginal infections

Thrush

This infection is also called monilia or candida. The organism is a yeast which is commonly found in the body without causing any problems. At times a woman may notice symptoms, particularly during pregnancy, or when she is on antibiotics or some other medication. Women who are diabetic or who have other illnesses may have recurring problems with thrush.

Common symptoms of thrush can include itchiness, burning, soreness, a thick white or yellow discharge, discomfort during intercourse and pain when urinating. Sometimes men may also notice irritation and redness of the penis after sex if their partner has thrush, but it is not considered to be a sexually transmissible infection (STI).

Thrush is diagnosed by examination and confirmed by taking swabs. It may also be detected on a routine Pap smear.

Thrush does not have to be treated if it is not bothering you. Some women find their symptoms can be relieved by sitting in a warm salty bath or by using cold compresses.

Many women incorrectly diagnose their symptoms as thrush, however, what can look like thrush can often be a variety of other conditions or problems. If you are certain that thrush is the cause of your symptoms, antifungal vaginal creams and pessaries are available over the counter at pharmacies. If you are finding that thrush is a frequent problem it is advisable to visit a doctor or the FPWA clinic. The doctor will examine you to confirm that thrush is the cause of your symptoms and may prescribe other treatments such as oral antifungal tablets. The doctor may also take this opportunity to rule out the possibility of STIs, which can also cause irritation.

Putting yogurt on an irritated vulva will not get rid of the infection.

Bacterial vaginosis (BV)

This is a common condition in women, characterised by a decrease in normal vaginal bacteria and an overgrowth of other bacteria. It is not really understood what causes BV, but it is more common in women who smoke, douche, are older or taking antibiotics. It is not considered to be an STI, but it is more common in women in new relationships, or women who have more frequent or unprotected sex.

BV is the most common cause of abnormal vaginal discharge. The discharge may be white or grey with an unpleasant fishy or stale odour. Vulval irritation can occur and sex may be uncomfortable. Many women with BV do not notice any symptoms, but some women get frequent recurrences which can be very frustrating.

BV may be diagnosed by examination by testing the pH of the vaginal fluid, and confirmed by swabs. Sometimes BV is noticed on a Pap smear.

BV does not have to be treated if it is not bothering you. If it is a problem your doctor may prescribe antibiotics in the form of tablets or vaginal cream. The FPWA clinic or your doctor may also recommend treatment if you are planning to have an intrauterine device fitted or any gynaecological operation (eg a curette or an abortion).

Telling partners

It is a good idea to talk to your partner if you have a vaginal infection or are experiencing vulval pain, even though it can be embarrassing. They may find it helpful to read this pamphlet. It is generally better to avoid sexual intercourse if you have an infection, particularly if you have pain or discomfort, to prevent ongoing problems.

Ways of coping

Vaginal infections and vulval pain are very common, but can be a real problem for some women. If you are feeling distressed, it is important to talk to your doctor, nurse or a counsellor for further information and support. If you are experiencing pain, relaxation and stress management techniques may be of help.

Practising safe sex reduces the risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs).



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