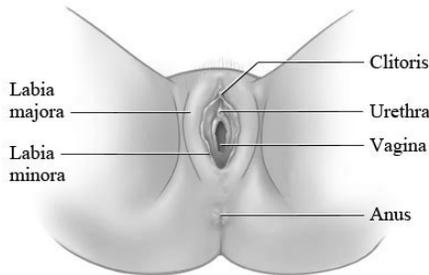




## Keep Your Vagina Healthy

Many women wonder about vaginal smells and discharge and what is normal. Each woman's vagina is unique. It has its own smell and amount of discharge that changes during her menstrual cycle.



The vagina (the inside part of female genitals) makes fluids with sexual arousal and physical activity. It is a natural system with changing levels of yeast, bacteria, and acidity.

The vagina usually can keep these in healthy balance by itself.

You may notice some discharge on your underwear. This is normal. It may be white, pale yellow, or clear. It may have a distinct but not bad smell. Pay attention to your body's own unique cycle. If you know what is usual for your body, you can tell when something has changed, or when you need to see a healthcare provider.

### Do I need to douche?

No. Some women use douches to force water or another liquid into the vagina to rinse away discharge or menstrual blood. It is not necessary or recommended. Douches can upset the vagina's natural balance and increase the risk of irritation. The vagina makes its own fluids that clean and protect it. The safest and best way to clean your vagina is to let it clean itself.

Wash your vulva (the outside of the vagina) daily with cool or lukewarm water. Avoid using scented soaps or hygiene products. They can irritate the skin.

Some women think douching after having sex can help prevent pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections (STI's). **It does not!** In fact, it may push sperm even further into your vagina.

### What else affects vaginal health?

Vaginal irritation can be caused by:

- antibiotics
- stress
- illness
- poor diet
- hormone changes
- STI's
- yeast overgrowth
- other common infections

To reduce the risk of STI's, use barrier methods (like condoms and dental dams) for birth control every time you have sex.

**Important note:** Non-barrier birth control methods (like the pill, diaphragms, and IUDs) do not protect against STI's or HIV/AIDS.

See a healthcare provider if you have:

- itching, irritation or soreness in or around your vagina.
- a burning feeling when you pee.
- increased or unusual discharge.
- change in colour of discharge.
- swelling of the labia (lips of vagina).
- unexpected bleeding.
- pain during sex.
- unpleasant or strong vaginal odour.
- abdominal pain.
- bumps or sores on your vagina or vulva.

**Important note:** Don't try to diagnose yourself. Some of these symptoms may be signs of conditions that need treatment.

## How to care for your vulva

The vulva is the outside part of the female genitals. Some of the following tips can help if you are concerned about irritation:

### General Hygiene

The fewer chemicals and fragrances on or near your vulva, the less likely you are to have irritation. Try to:

- use soft, white, unscented toilet paper
- use cotton, unscented pads and tampons
- avoid using scented products – like bubble baths, feminine hygiene products, creams & powders - on your vulva
- take lukewarm or cool showers instead of hot baths when possible
- avoid shaving and waxing - they can irritate skin and make some infections (like genital warts) worse
- wipe from **front to back after using the toilet** to prevent spreading bacteria from your anus (bum) to your vulva

## Clothing and Laundry

Clothing that helps air circulate will keep your vulva dry. Try to:

- Wear 100% cotton underwear (or with a cotton panel)
- Avoid wearing pantyhose or tights. Consider thigh-highs or knee-highs instead. If you wear tights, choose ones with a cotton panel
- Change from wet bathing suits and exercise clothes as soon as possible
- Avoid wearing thong underwear. It can cause irritation or yeast overgrowth
- Limit wearing tight pants. Wear skirts or loose clothes without underwear when at home
- Sleep without underwear
- Avoid wearing panty liners when you don't have your period
- Wash your underwear with unscented detergent. Avoid fabric softeners
- Double-rinse underwear or other clothing that touches your vulva

## Sexual Activity

- Allow time for foreplay so the vagina can lubricate itself
- Add a water-soluble lubricant like Astroglide™ or KY Jelly™
- It's helpful if your hands and your partner's hands are clean
- Pee and rinse the vulva with cool water after sex
- Put a cold cloth or ice pack (wrapped in cloth) if you have a burning feeling after sex
- Put 2% Xylocaine Jelly™ (at drug stores) on the burning area

## Physical Activity

These can cause irritation:

- activity that puts direct pressure on the vulva (like cycling or horseback riding)
- swimming pools, hot tubs, and saunas with a lot of chlorine

## Comfort Measures

To reduce and soothe irritation, try to:

- Protect dry and fragile skin with a cream like Vaseline™, Glaxo Base™, Barriere™ or Penaten™. **Important:** Do not use these oil-based lubricants during sex. They break down latex
- Relieve burning or irritation with lukewarm or cool sitz baths (or sea-salt soaks)
- Relieve burning by putting a cold cloth or ice pack (wrapped in cloth) on your vulva
- Keep track and avoid any foods that increase irritation

**Disclaimer:** WHC provides health information for your learning only. It should not be used to replace a visit with a healthcare provider.