

Vulval and vaginal health

The vulva is the external female genital organs surrounding the opening of the vagina and includes the clitoris, labia minora and labia majora.

The vagina is an expandable muscular tube with soft, flexible lining which provides lubrication and sensation. The vagina has several important roles; it serves as a passageway for menstruation (period blood) to leave the uterus and expands to provide a delivery route for childbirth and sexual intercourse.

All vaginas and vulvas vary in shape, size and colour and this can sometimes cause concern. There is a wide range of normal but if you are concerned about the health of your vulva speak with your health care provider.

Should I worry about the size of my labia?

The labia are the lips or folds of skin that sit on either side of the vaginal opening. Their appearance varies from woman to woman and the left and right labia can often be of different size or shape in the same woman. Large labia are only a concern if they affect the woman's working, social or sporting life. If you are concerned about the health, size or shape of your vulva or vagina, speak with your health care provider. If you experience persistent itch, burn or a new lump or skin discolouration of your vulva, discuss this with your health provider.

For more information about labias and normal variants please visit:

<http://www.labialibrary.org.au/>

What assists vulval and vaginal health – know the facts?

- Wear loose clothing made from natural fibres (cotton, linen, silk, bamboo)
- Avoid wearing tight clothing with thick seams and G Strings (these garments can cause irritation)
- Don't douche (douching can kill the good bacteria that control infection)
- Do not use feminine deodorant, deodorised tampons or pads, creams or talcum powder
- If possible, use tampons instead of pads
- Aloe Vera and tea tree oil may irritate or cause allergy
- Change out of wet clothing as soon as possible, especially bathing suits or sports clothes
- Avoid spa baths, bubble baths and prolonged hot showers
- Avoid using soaps near the vulva (instead use warm water with salt or a soap substitute such as a pH balanced body wash)
- Wash underwear in hot water and/or use a hypoallergenic / non perfumed product if you experience persistent irritations and infections
- Exercise regularly and eat a well-balanced diet
- Avoid scratching – if itchy, use cold compresses
- Wipe from front to back when toileting to avoid transferring bacteria to the vagina
- If you have diabetes, maintain blood sugar levels as close to normal as possible

Is my vaginal discharge normal?

The vagina is designed to self-clean with the help of natural secretions (discharge) and healthy bacteria. A woman's vagina normally produces a discharge that is described as clear or slightly cloudy, non-irritating and odour free. The

amount and consistency of discharge can vary for a woman during the normal menstrual cycle. After a period there may be minimal discharge. Around the time of ovulation (when the egg is released from the ovary) the discharge increases, becoming sticky and clear appearing similar to 'egg white'. In the second half of the menstrual cycle the discharge is heavier and often looks whitish/yellow in colour.

Women that have an Intrauterine Device (IUD) may also have increased discharge.

A discharge that might indicate an infection may have an offensive odour or cause irritation that might be itchy or burn or both. Sexual intercourse can also cause further irritation if an infection is present. Inflammation of the vagina from an infection is called vaginitis. It is important to see your health professional or doctor if you think there has been a change in the amount, colour or smell of your discharge.

The vagina is an acidic environment due to bacteria called lacto-bacillus that colonise there. This bacterium maintains a normal healthy acidic environment. However, if the balance is upset or other bacteria "overgrow" it may result in an infection. It's not always easy for a woman to know if she has an infection as it may occur without any changes in the normal vaginal discharge.

Common types of vaginal infections

Candida or a vaginal "yeast" infection

Vaginal yeast infections (often referred to as thrush) are caused by one of the many species of fungus called

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Candida. Candida normally lives in small numbers in the vagina, as well as in the mouth and digestive tract of both men and women. The vagina usually keeps candida controlled and in small numbers due to the acidic environment created from the healthy bacteria; lacto-bacillus. However, if yeast “overgrows” you may experience symptoms such as a thick, white vaginal discharge with vulval irritation, burning, and itchiness. Yeast infections are not usually transmitted through sexual intercourse and are not considered a sexually transmitted infection.

The following increase your risk of developing a yeast infection:

- Recent antibiotic treatment – yeast overgrowth due to healthy bacteria being killed off from antibiotics
- Uncontrolled diabetes – can cause too much sugar in the urine and vagina and create an imbalance of bacteria
- Changing hormone levels in pregnancy or when taking the oral contraceptive pill
- Immune disorders

Yeast infections can be detected in women with or without symptoms and may be diagnosed at the time of a genital examination. Tests can be performed to diagnose vaginal / vulval candida. Yeast infections are treated with antifungal medications that can be purchased from your pharmacy without a script. These treatments may include:

- Tablet to be taken orally (avoid in pregnancy)
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Pessary or cream inserted high into the vagina /or a topical external cream. Treatment is only required / recommended if symptoms are present.

Bacterial Vaginosis

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is the most common type of vaginal infection in women of reproductive age. BV is caused by an imbalance or overgrowth of several bacteria known as Gardnerella and/or Bacteroides. These types of bacteria seem to overgrow in much the same way as Candida. The exact reason for this overgrowth is not known.

BV is not transmitted through sexual intercourse but is more common in women who are sexually active.

Up to 50% of women who have bacterial vaginosis do not have any symptoms, but if symptoms appear they can include:

- White or discoloured discharge (can be thin or watery in appearance)
- Discharge that smells “fishy” – often stronger after sexual intercourse
- Pain during urination
- Itchy or sore vagina

Diagnosis of BV can be performed by collecting a sample from the vagina which can then be sent for testing. In many cases your health care provider can diagnose BV during a genital examination. Bacterial vaginosis is treated with antibiotics. The most common treatments are oral antibiotics or a vaginal cream / gel.

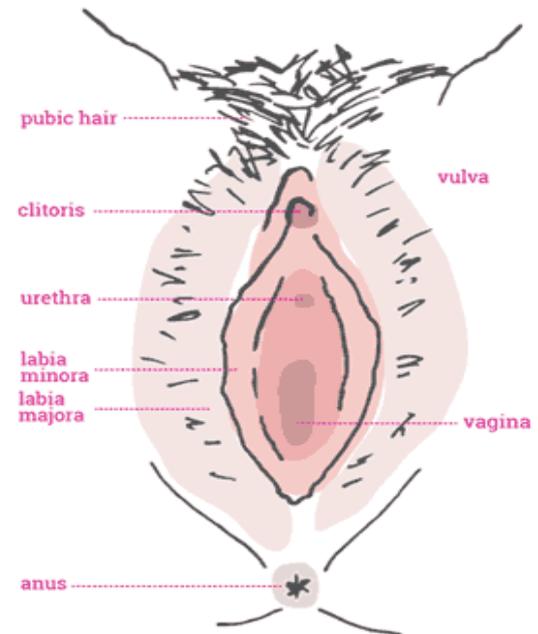


Figure 1 - The Vulva

What is Group B Streptococcus (GBS)?

GBS is a bacterium that is often found in the vagina and/or intestine. It is not regarded as an infection or a common cause for vaginal discharge. GBS does not usually require treatment however if symptoms are present then treatment may be advised. GBS during pregnancy may cause neonatal infection such as pneumonia. Maternity services will have strategies to prevent early onset group B strep disease in newborns, which may include screening during pregnancy.

For more information:

- <http://www.womhealth.org.au>
- <https://jeanhailes.org.au>

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