

## **Healthy and sexy down there**

Even as the cosmetics industry targets the vagina, experts insist women must shift the focus back to health.

Now that the face has been botoxed, the breasts augmented, and the derriere made bootilicious, it's time for the beauty and cosmetics world to get up close and personal with the vagina. Nips and tucks, creams and lotions, lasers and waxing, the industry is telling women what to do with their pubes and other parts within. Is health taking a backseat? Are these practices entirely safe? Prevention delves deep to bring you the truth.

Payal Khanna, 25, a Gurgaon-based publishing consultant admits that though painful, she began to wax her pubic area as she felt more adventurous in her sexual life and more confident. Health experts however express concern and prescribe caution. "The vagina is an elastic muscular canal that plays a crucial function in the female reproductive system," **says Dr Duru Shah, chairman, Gynaecworld and Gynaecworld Fertility Clinic, Mumbai. It provides a passageway for blood, tissue and fluid to leave the body during menstruation.**

When the nerve endings that are located at the mouth of a woman's vagina are stimulated, they provide pleasurable sensations during intercourse. Its elasticity allows it to widen to receive the penis. It serves to receive the viscous semen ejaculated by the male partner and liquefies it owing to the higher internal body temperature. This allows sperms to swim further into the uterus via the cervix. **"During childbirth the vagina expands and provides a passage for the infant to make its way from the uterus to outside of the mother's body," adds Shah.**



### **Know your Vagina**

It has a delicate pH balance: The normal pH of the vagina is 4.5 which is on the low or acidic side of the spectrum, neutral being 7. A change in the pH ups the risk of infection (vaginitis) down there

**How you can maintain it:** Clean the vulva with water; use perfume-free glycerine soaps; change pads every few hours during your periods. **"The pH of human blood is 7.4. Wearing soiled pads for too long may alter the vaginal pH and lead to vaginitis," says Shah.**

**It harbours healthy bacteria:** "Bacterial flora like Doderlein's bacilli in the vaginal area protect it from extraneous infection," says Dr Urvashi Jha, director, Department of Gynaecology, Fortis Flt Lt Rajan Dhall Hospital, New Dehi. These beneficial bacteria prevent harmful bacteria from invading the reproductive system. Moisture aids growth of harmful microbes. "So keep the area as dry as possible: towel dry after a bath and wear cotton panties," says Dr Loveleena Nadir, senior consultant gynaecologist and obstetrician, Fortis La Femme, New Delhi. How you can maintain it: Wash the vulva area with water each time you pee; use condoms; avoid sex during menstruation as the pH of menstrual blood is alkaline and in this environment, infections may be introduced.

**The vaginal tissue changes with age:** Following puberty, the uterus gets larger and the vaginal tissue turns thicker and more elastic causing the vagina to expand without being injured. Young girls before puberty and post-menopausal women, both lack the oestrogen hormone, "hence the vagina is thin and susceptible to tearing easily, that may lead to vaginitis and bleeding," says Nadir.

**How you can maintain it: Post-menopause dryness that may make sex painful can be tackled with water-based lubes. However, if you find it messy, ask your gynae to recommend vaginal oestrogen creams. "These don't just lubricate but also help to improve vaginal health," says Shah**



**The vagina cleans itself:** The vaginal discharge (clear or milky, but without a bad odour) keeps it clean from within. "The amount we discharge is influenced by our hormones and it varies during the menstrual cycle," says Chennaibased gynaecologist and obstetrician, Dr Amudha Hari. How you can maintain it: Follow basic hygiene (as mentioned above) to keep your vagina clean and healthy. Wear cotton panties. "Avoid pantyliners: the plastic backing on them prevents air circulation and traps heat and sweat. Avoid thongs and panties that can cause friction in the genital area," says Hari. Docs also recommend sanitary napkins over tampons in a tropical country like ours to ward off infection risk. Also avoid patting talcum powder down there to feel fresh. New research suggests that talc particles could contain carcinogens that may travel up to the ovaries causing ovarian cancer. "The jury is still out on this, but if you are wary, skip the talc," says Hari.

### **Problems Down There**

Modern-day products, poor hygiene habits, infection after sexual intercourse, prolonged use of antibiotics during illnesses, allergic reactions to drugs or certain products can lead to infection in the vagina. "A vaginal infection not only causes physical discomfort but is also emotionally distressing. Many women are unable to discuss it with confidence," adds Jha. Most infections can be prevented by maintaining good personal and sexual hygiene. It is advisable to abstain from sex until the infection is cured. "You may pass the infection to your partner and may not be able to enjoy sex with all the itchiness down there," adds Nadir. But if you decide to have sex, ask your partner to wear a condom. | Yeast infection: This causes severe itching, curdy discharge and foul odour in the vaginal area. "It is treated with oral and topical anti-fungals," says Nadir. | Trichomoniasis: The symptoms of this sexually transmitted infection include copious greenish or yellowish discharge, vaginal irritation, foul odour. "The doc may prescribe

antibacterial medication to treat it," says Nadir. | **Bacterial vaginosis: "This common infection is symptomised by a creamy discharge with a fishy odour, especially after sex," says Shah. A change in the normal bacteria flora due to recent antibiotic use or douching may lead to it. Having multiple sexual partners could also make you susceptible. It is treated with antibiotics.**

### **The Buzz about Fuzz**

Recently, the market has been hit by a slew of products 'to improve' women's private parts. Vaginal creams and washes that promise a whiter pubic area (though the advertisements erroneously suggest it's the vagina that will turn 'fairer' with the cream); vaginal tightening creams promising to make a mommy's not-so-taut vagina 'virgin-like again' and so on. The medical community isn't amused. **"It's all about body image. The cosmetics world is enticing women with creams and lotions while their efficaciousness remains unproven," warns Shah.** | Waxing: Talk about vajazzling. Removing pubic hair never came to such a close shave as now. We don't know about Latin America but the rest of the world is going for the Brazilian wax. "The pubic hair is designed for a purpose by nature.

Shaving, waxing or us using laser for hair removal is unnecessary and makes the pubic zone vulnerable to infections, chemical and allergic reactions," says Dr Rinku Sengupta, gynaecologist and obstetrician, Sitaram Bhartia Institute of Science and Research, New Delhi. You can trim the pubic hair, if at all. | **Whitening Washes: A particular brand claimed that using its product would give a woman a whiter vagina. "Ridiculous! All vaginas whether they belong to the white-skinned or dark-skinned women are pink-just as the inside of any mouth is," dismisses Shah.** Pigmentation of skin after childbirth or darker skin around the pubic area due to chafing are best left alone as nature's reactions to changes in the body.

**Feminine Washes:** While feminine washes promise to remove any odour caused by sweating, they are not necessary, say doctors. Plain water will do. "The primary colonising bacteria of a healthy vagina, in combination with fluids secreted, are greatly responsible for the characteristic scent associated with the vaginal area. It's normal and nothing to be ashamed of," emphasises Hari.

**Tightening Creams:** These creams are known to contain chemicals which do not really tighten the vagina but give an astringent-like feel. "The chemicals in them can cause harm by irritating the vagina. Some tightening creams contain alum which has been claimed to tighten the vagina, but honestly does nothing to it," says Shah. The actual physiology of the vagina cannot be changed through creams. "If you really think you need to fix it down there, resorting to such half-hearted

**measures won't work. Only surgery can help tighten the vagina," Shah adds. Kegel exercises can help strengthen pelvic floor muscles for overall well-being. "Make a distinction between what's scientifically proven and what's simply a marketing gimmick," advises Shah.** Perhaps it's time we let the Mound of Venus hold on to its feminine mystery. Au naturale.

<http://wonderwoman.intoday.in/story/healthy-and-sexy-down-there/1/101688.html>