

Fact Sheet

Normal vulva and vagina

womensnewbornhealth.com.au

These days there is a lot of talk about what is normal 'down there' and women may feel worried or self-conscious that they look different to other women in this area. Recently, cosmetic and plastic surgeons have even started to offer surgery, called labioplasty, to make women look 'normal' in the vulval area.

The truth is that, as with other parts of our bodies like our faces or our breasts, everyone is unique and different and we don't need to conform or worry about looking like everyone else. It is very common for the lips of the vulva to be not symmetrical (even) in shape and size.

What is the vulva?

The vulva is the name given to the genital area where the vagina ends. The vagina is the passage which connects the vulva to the cervix. The cervix is also called the 'neck' of the womb or uterus. It is through the vagina that you bleed when you have a period and it is the passage through which a baby is born. The vulva consists of skin, glands and hair and can be affected by any condition which affects skin elsewhere in the body like eczema, psoriasis, infections and occasionally cancers.

What can I do to keep this area healthy?

The skin of the vulval area has to put up with quite a lot! Tight jeans, sanitary pads and panty liners, sweaty gym clothes, soap and lubricants, and of course sex – all these add up over time and so it isn't surprising that many women develop skin irritation (dermatitis) in this area.

Avoiding certain irritants can protect the vulval skin and prevent irritation and itching from starting.

Things to avoid

- Perfumed or coloured toilet paper
- Soaps, cleansers, bubble baths, perfumes, powders or sprays
- Thrush creams (unless your doctor has diagnosed thrush) and haemorrhoid creams
- Vaginal douches or rinsing out the vagina
- Vigorous rubbing dry of the area or washing it with a flannel
- Tight clothes – particularly clothes made of synthetic material or sweaty gym clothes
- Washing underwear in strong detergent and fabric softeners
- Unnecessary use of pads or panty liners
- Some women are allergic to latex condoms or oil based lubricants
- Shaving and waxing

Things to do

- Wear cotton underwear and sleep without underwear
- Use tampons rather than pads
- Wipe the vulval area clean from front to back and pat this area dry rather than wipe when you urinate
- Wash the vulva with water only and pat it dry
- Use water based lubricants and non-latex condoms if you think these are causing problems and irritating your skin.

What about sex?

If the vulval skin is healthy and you are properly aroused (have enough foreplay) then sex should not be uncomfortable. It is not usually sex which causes vulval irritation but rather all the things listed above which makes the skin sensitive and then sex may become uncomfortable because the skin is irritated.

Fact Sheet

Normal vulva and vagina

womensnewbornhealth.com.au

What about vulval (genital) piercing?

Piercings of the clitoral hood, clitoris and labial lips, as well as male genital piercing, are becoming more common. Some people believe this started long ago in ancient times however; the truth is that genital piercing is really quite a modern idea and practice. It was actually very rare in ancient cultures.

Reasons why women may have genital piercing can be varied and may include wanting to feel different or unique, or believing that genital piercing may improve sexual pleasure for both themselves and their partner. There is however, no strong evidence that this is actually the case.

Although we understand the growing trend for genital piercings, doctors generally advise against the practice for the following reasons.

- The risk of infection – this includes the risk of infection of the pierced area and the risk that this could spread to other parts of the reproductive system (uterus, tubes and ovaries) causing abscess and infertility as well as the risk of HepB, HepC and HIV if the piercing is not done by an experienced and safe operator. It is very important to check that all equipment the operator uses is properly sterilised or disposable.
- The risk of scarring and chronic pain from the piercing which may make sex painful or difficult.
- The risk of bleeding during or after the piercing
- The problems that piercing can cause if you use barrier contraception like condoms. Condoms may be damaged or torn by the piercing making them ineffective and placing you at risk of pregnancy or STDs. If you have a genital piercing it is worthwhile thinking about using another form of contraception as well as condoms.

If you are considering having a genital piercing, or have complications after a piercing, do not hesitate to talk with your doctor about it so that you are well informed and any problems can be treated as early as possible to prevent long term issues.

Knowing about what is normal and how to keep for the vulval area healthy is very important because problems in this area can cause women a lot of discomfort and decrease sexual pleasure.

We welcome further feedback on this brochure as a way of continually improving our service.

Send your feedback to:

WSLHD-Get_Involved@health.nsw.gov.au