

# WHY DO WE FIND IT SO HARD TO SAY...

▼  
VAGINA? ►

What is it about the word 'vagina' that reduces us to giggles – or squirms? With two thirds of British women too embarrassed to talk about their genitals and many of us having only a sketchy understanding of this important part of our anatomy, it's time to get to grips with the V-word. By **Gemma Askham**

If your vagina was a person, she'd be the friend request you ignore on Facebook. Because, while we pride ourselves on advancing our body knowledge, this thirst for information stops between our hipbone and inner thigh. The V-word is to health what the C-word is to sex: shocking, awkward, a no-no.

When cancer charity The Eve Appeal recently spoke to 1,000 women, 65% admitted that they had a problem just saying vagina or vulva. Nearly a third had been so embarrassed to say them to a doctor that they hadn't gone to their GP when they had a gynaecological problem. Instead, we mess around with words like 'down there' or, worse, 'front bottom'.

And it's not just a language problem. Dr Pixie McKenna, a GP on Channel 4's *Embarrassing Bodies*, sees a big knowledge shortfall, too. "We really aren't au fait with our own anatomy, especially the vulva – no one even knows where it is," she says. To recap: the vagina is the internal passage to the cervix and uterus, while the vulva covers everything external.

"Despite my job, I have only ever once had a girlfriend talk to me about her genitals – and that was under the steam of sauvignon blanc," she adds.

The root of our prudishness, according to gynaecologist Dr Elizabeth Stewart, author of *The V Book*, can be found in history. "Female genitals have been kept out of sight by myths, cultural taboos and a lack of medical interest," she says. "Even today,

there is no research journal devoted to the vagina and vulva," – something she believes fuels the 'don't talk about it, don't think about it' approach.

Increased openness can give us many things. Better sex, for one. Sexual research scientist Dr Debby Herbenick found that women who feel positive and understand more about their genitals find it easier to orgasm. And better health: one in five women skip smears – but that

one test can reduce the chance of cervical cancer developing by 75%, says Dr McKenna. Meanwhile, the hormones driving our reproductive system can affect everything from our mood and weight to the arrival of that pesky chin hair.

And it's hard to feel embarrassed going to your GP if you're aware that three in four women will have thrush at some point, 15% get cystitis every year, and up to 30% will suffer from bacterial vaginosis (a bacterial imbalance inside the vagina).

Health worries aside, being open will also help debunk the idea that there is one standard-issue vagina. "People don't realise how creative nature has been with women's genitals. They can be pink, red, brown, grey, black or slightly purple. They're usually not symmetrical. They can have ruffles. Inner labia often hang down lower than the outer labia. People have all sorts of individual aspects to their genitals," explains Dr Herbenick, who co-wrote *Read My Lips: A Complete Guide To The Vagina And Vulva* to prove this.

Her research also found that we're our own harshest critics. "Men generally feel positive about women's genitals, including how they look, smell, taste and feel," she says. Which means one powerful thing: "There is no need to compare the appearance of your genitals to any other woman's on the planet."

Instead of comparison, let's reunite the right C-words with the V-words – so that's confidence,

conversation and clarity. Here, we talk loudly and openly about a part of your anatomy that you may not have visualised since your first Tampax leaflet. But with one aim: to make you proud of your body, and happy to ask questions about it. ►

## OMV!

Just the facts, ma'am

- The vagina is lined by the same covering as the inside of the mouth.
- The clitoris has 8,000 nerve endings – double that of the penis.
- While the clitoris only appears to be pea-sized, beneath the surface there's a rubbery shaft that divides into two wishbone-shaped tissues.
- The left side of a woman's labia is often longer and larger than the right – just like how a man's left testicle typically hangs lower than his right.
- One study showed that the width of a vagina's inner lips varies between 7mm and 5cm.
- During birth and sex, your vagina can expand to around six inches long and five inches wide.
- The vagina doesn't go straight up. It's at a 30° angle, which is why it's easier to direct a tampon towards the back.

# YOUR V&V

## THE DOS AND DON'TS

"If your vagina or vulva suddenly feel different, seek medical advice," says Dr Vanessa Mackay, consultant gynaecologist at Glasgow's Southern General Hospital. Otherwise, these tips boost its day-to-day happiness.

### DO BREAK THE CYSTITIS CURSE

According to the NHS, most women will suffer at some point from cystitis – the bladder inflammation that makes having a wee your worst nightmare. The short distance between a woman's anus and bladder makes us susceptible to transferring bacteria from one to the other. These help: pee when you have to go (no hanging on forever) and after sex, and always wipe front-to-back.

### DON'T OVERHEAT

Think how dry the rest of your body's skin gets after a boiling hot shower – then have some sympathy for your vulva, which is WAY more delicate. Go easy on the hot tap. Post-shower, don't dry too roughly. "The folds of your labia are like your mouth – never meant to dry out," says Dr Stewart.

### DO EXERCISE YOUR PELVIC FLOOR

"It weakens as you grow older and exercises can improve sensitivity during sex, as well as reducing your chance of developing bladder weakness later on," says Dr Mackay, who suggests this: sitting down, squeeze the same muscles you would to stop urine flow (but keep your stomach muscles relaxed) ten-15 times, whenever you can.

### DON'T OVERWASH

The vagina self-cleans, so never, ever wash inside your vagina as this "washes away good bacteria and pushes any issues (bad bacteria, STIs) up past the cervix and into the uterus," says Dr Herbenick. Just wash around the outside, using water and a mild pH-neutral soap.

### DO GET TESTED

The NHS suggests you have a free check-up at your nearest STI clinic every time you swap sexual partners, especially since some sexually transmitted diseases can be symptom-free – such as chlamydia, the most common STI in the UK. To find available services, visit [nhs.uk](http://nhs.uk), click on 'services near you' then type in your postcode.

### DON'T EXPECT ROSES

"Scent is to be expected: the vulva has many sweat glands, and sweat produces odour," says Dr Stewart, who describes normal vaginal secretions as smelling slightly like sour milk. A vagina that smells of perfume = not normal.

### DO TREAT THRUSH

If you're run down, you'll be more susceptible to this yeast overgrowth that causes itching. A third of women taking antibiotics get it because the good bacteria leaves with the bad. Don't neglect symptoms: you can buy treatment at pharmacies, or visit your GP.

### DON'T USE TOO MANY PERFUMED PRODUCTS

If you have sensitive skin, remember that the bubbles in bubble bath can be made from potentially irritating chemicals – only use a little per tub. And, FYI, latex condoms may not be your friend – about 1% of the population has a latex allergy.

### DO GO DOWN A TAMPON SIZE

If a tampon is too absorbent for your flow, it will draw fluid out of the walls of your vagina instead – which is drying and irritating. "If a tampon isn't saturated after four hours, go down an absorbency level," says Dr Stewart. For the same reason, she advises against wearing a pantyliner every day.

"I make casual reference to my vagina, like it's a car or a chest of drawers."  
*Lena Dunham*

"Everybody wants me to show my vagina to the world. And the truth is, I don't have to."  
*Lady Gaga*

"I don't consider myself beautiful or famous, but my vagina certainly is. Everyone knows this. I have the Angelina Jolie of vaginas."  
*Amy Poehler*

"We think the vagina is on the outside. I say grab a mirror and play along. Get in there. You're supposed to treat it like the beautiful flower that it is, the delicate flower that it is."  
*Cameron Diaz*

# An owner's guide

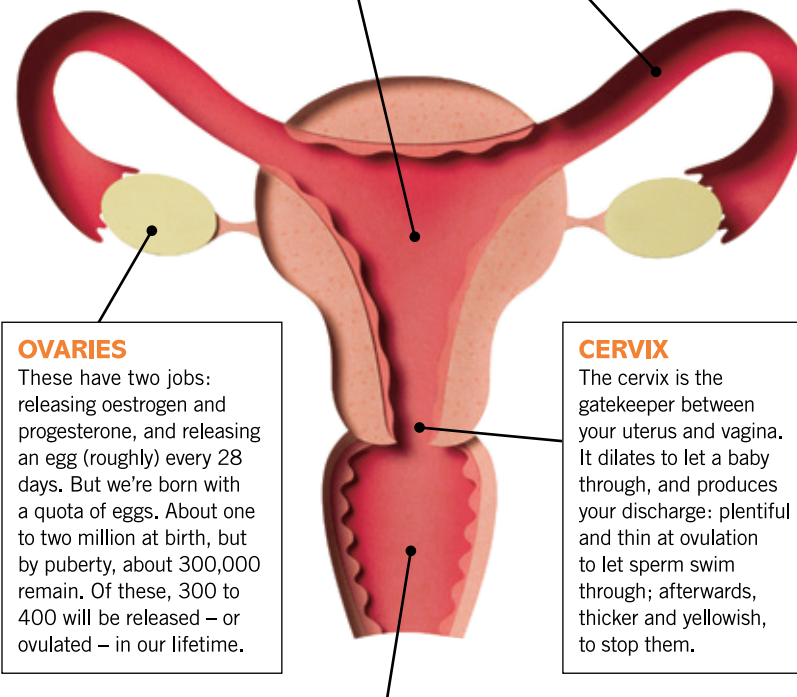
50% of women aged 26-35 can't correctly label the uterus, cervix and ovaries. We get it: school sex ed was a long time ago. Treat this cut-out-and-keep glossary as revision.

### UTERUS/WOMB

Confusing fact: womb and uterus are two words for exactly the same thing. It's where a foetus grows, the uterus expanding from the size of a pear to a watermelon to let it do so. If a fertilised egg isn't implanted, the uterus lining is shed as your period, along with the egg.

### FALLOPIAN TUBES

Inside these two, roughly 10cm-long tubes, tiny hairs and muscular contractions transport an egg from the ovaries to the uterus. The aim: to get fertilised en route. An egg can only survive for 24 hours in the Fallopian tubes, but sperm can wait it out for a week – so you can conceive even if sperm entered before the egg.



### OVARIES

These have two jobs: releasing oestrogen and progesterone, and releasing an egg (roughly) every 28 days. But we're born with a quota of eggs. About one to two million at birth, but by puberty, about 300,000 remain. Of these, 300 to 400 will be released – or ovulated – in our lifetime.

### CERVIX

The cervix is the gatekeeper between your uterus and vagina. It dilates to let a baby through, and produces your discharge: plentiful and thin at ovulation to let sperm swim through; afterwards, thicker and yellowish, to stop them.

### VAGINA

Put simply, the vagina is a passageway. It sees menstrual flow leave, a penis arrive, is a canal for birth – and, all the while, houses ten trillion good bacteria (lactobacilli) to create such an acidic environment that no

infection-causing bacteria come along for the ride.

### VULVA

**Outer lips (labia majora)** Act as a cushion during sex, and contain glands that secrete oils to 'waterproof' the vulva from bacteria, urine and menstrual blood.

### Inner lips (labia minora)

Full of nerve endings and blood vessels, they plump with blood during sex – kind of like the penis.

**Vestibule** The area between your inner lips; the entrance to the vagina and the urethra are here.

**Urethra** A short tube that leads to your bladder.

# LUST AND YOUR LAND DOWN UNDER

Ever wondered what happens behind the scenes when you're turned on? Here's what your body is busy doing...

**1 Relaxing.** The vulva is chock-a-block with blood vessels. When your brain senses some action, the walls of the blood vessels relax, letting lots of blood in.

**2 Lubricating.** As blood flows to the vagina, fluid droplets move through its walls and glands release lubricating fluid. This wetness makes sex comfortable, and helps keep sperm alive.

**3 Expanding.** The upper part of the vagina expands to accommodate the penis (called 'tenting'), and the lower part swells to grasp onto it. Due to the blood flow, the clitoris and inner lips can double in size.

**4 Contracting.** Your orgasm is a contraction of the muscles around the vagina – which send impulses through nerves to your brain. After five to ten seconds, blood starts draining away. ©

