

## HIGHLIGHTS

- There is urgent demand for accurate and trustworthy health information
- The vulva is the external opening of the vagina
- Harmful conditions may arise due to moisture, sweating, menses and hormonal fluctuations
- The vulva is more susceptible to topical agents as compared to forearm skin
- Women differ in their personal hygiene practices based on differences in cultural belief and religious practices
- Bathing and cleaning oneself are important for staying healthy
- Pubic hair removal has become more common for aesthetic reasons rather than solely for cultural and religious reasons

# WOMEN'S HEALTH

## COMMON PROBLEMS & SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

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With so much misinformation out on the worldwide web, it is difficult for women to find and secure good answers to their health questions. As misinformation is being profusely disseminated, there is now a more real and urgent demand for accurate health information. This article will attempt to address some important women's health issues. If you want to learn more about some common problems and discover some simple solutions, then this article is for you!

### PHYSIOLOGY OF THE VULVOVAGINAL AREA

The vulva is the external opening of the vagina. It acts as the first line of defense against pathogenic organisms. Issues often arise when contaminants collect in the vulvar folds. Harmful conditions can arise from increased moisture, sweating, menses and hormonal fluctuations. These conditions all influence microbial growth and the balance of good and bad organisms. When the balance is more in favour of pathogenic organisms, odor and vulvovaginal infection may result. The vaginal mucosa is highly vascularized and this means that the vagina is more readily able to absorb harmful chemicals into the blood stream. Because of vulvar skin hydration, occlusion and frictional properties, the vulva is more susceptible to topical agents as compared to forearm skin. Genital skin differs from other areas of the body because there is a thin stratum corneum in which are situated large hair follicles. These follicles can trap microbes and other substances that can permeate the skin.

### PRACTICES AROUND THE WORLD

Women differ in their personal hygiene practices based on differences in cultural beliefs and religious practices. Some women choose to wash the vulva with bubble bath or antiseptic products because of a consistent belief that rigorous body cleaning is necessary for health and wellbeing. Orthodox Jewish women are known to perform ritual baths called mikvehs. They have these baths after their menstrual periods and after childbirth. Muslims practice what is called ghusl which is a bathing ritual practiced by both men and women after sexual intercourse or menstruation. Women in Mozambique and South Africa are known to internally cleanse their vaginas using lemon juice, salt water or vinegar to get rid of vaginal discharge and treat sexually transmitted infections. Pubic hair removal has become more common for aesthetic reasons, but is also done for cultural and religious reasons too.



- Immune deficiency, hormonal changes, stress or the use of vaginal douches or soap to clean the vagina may upset the normal flora and cause infections
- Symptoms of vulvovaginal disease can include pruritus, pain and discomfort, changes in skin color and texture
- Vulvovaginal candidiasis can be defined as an odorless, white, curdy discharge with local irritation
- Bacterial vaginosis may be noticed by a white/gray homogenous coating of the vaginal walls and vulva along with a fishy odor
- Itching and discharge can be caused by infections, STI's and vulvar disorders
- Research statements have not made a causal link between hair removal and increased risk of infection

## COMMON ISSUES

### Vulvovaginal disease

Factors such as immune deficiency, hormonal changes, stress or the use of vaginal douches or soap to clean the vagina may upset the normal flora and cause infections. Dermatitis and other skin conditions can be caused when the barrier function of the skin is compromised by moisture from urine or vaginal discharge, enzymes such as stool residue, friction and heat. Symptoms of vulvovaginal disease can include pruritus, pain and discomfort, changes in skin color and texture. Vulvovaginal infections are more often polymicrobial involving both aerobic and anaerobic bacteria.

### Vulvovaginal candidiasis

This condition is often defined by an odorless, white, curdy discharge with local irritation. A person may experience intense erythema, edema of the labia minora and labia majora. Vulvovaginal candidiasis can be triggered by pregnancy, poorly controlled diabetes, and antibiotic use.

### Bacterial vaginosis

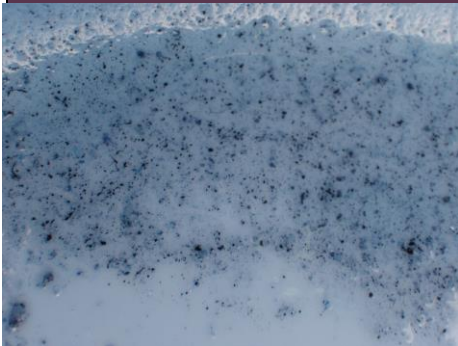
Among women of reproductive age, bacterial vaginosis is the most frequent cause of abnormal vaginal discharge. The condition is caused by an overgrowth of anaerobic bacteria found in the normal flora. Women may notice a white/gray homogeneous coating of the vaginal walls and vulva, and a fishy odor. The bacteria are very adaptive; therefore, recurring infections can be a problem. The vaginal flora must be re-established properly in order to avoid further infections.

### Vulvovaginal itching and abnormal discharge

Itching and discharge can be caused by vaginal infections, sexually transmitted infections, and vulvar disorders. Researchers have suggested that hair removal may cause micro trauma to the skin and lead to the spread of infectious agents throughout the pubic area. Pubic hair acts as a barrier against pathogens and complete removal could lead to increased risk of infections. However, research statements have not made a causal link between hair removal and increased risk of infection.



- Vaginitis means inflammation of the vagina
- A disturbance in the vaginal environment contributes to microbe overgrowth
- Eating a whole foods plant based diet will help prevent many health problems
- Avoiding the use of flesh foods, dairy, alcohol, sugary beverages and foods, yeasts and molds will promote good vaginal health
- Topical application of diluted tea tree oil may provide relief
- PMS sufferers ingest less iron, manganese and zinc
- Regular exercise is important for the maintenance of good health



## SOLUTIONS

### Vaginitis

Vaginitis means inflammation of the vagina. Women who suffer from vaginitis may experience increased volume of secretions, abnormal color or consistency or odor of secretions, itching, burning or irritation and painful urination or painful intercourse. Whenever there is a disturbance in the vaginal environment, there is an increased risk of a normally present microbe to overgrow and produce an infection. Since there is such a wide range of causes associated with vaginitis, it is best to consult a physician before trying any of the recommendations in this article. However, general rules of health including abstaining from flesh foods, dairy, alcohol, sugary beverages and foods, alcohol, yeasts and molds will contribute to the maintenance of good health. Also, eating a whole foods plant based diet including foods rich in Vitamin A, Beta-Carotene, B Vitamins, Vitamin C, bioflavonoids, Vitamin E and Zinc will contribute to maintaining a healthy body. If one gets an infection, tea tree oil (*Melaleuca alternifolia*) diluted to 1% in water used as a daily douche combined with saturated tampons used weekly may provide relief.

### Vulvovaginal candidiasis

*Candida albicans*, the yeast that most often contributes to chronic candidiasis, usually lives harmoniously in the inner warm creases and crevices of the vaginal tract. When overgrowth happens, women can experience chronic fatigue, loss of energy, general malaise, decreased libido and frequent bladder infections. Research indicates that the most important factors for *C. albicans* overgrowth are a high intake of sugar, dairy products, foods containing a high content of yeast or mold, alcohol and food allergies. Women may experience better health if they reduce or eliminate the intake of the foods that contribute to overgrowth. Garlic and tea tree oil demonstrate anti-fungal activity. Perhaps adding more garlic to one's diet may help prevent candidiasis. Moreover, topical application of tea tree oil may help reduce and eliminate yeast infections.

### Premenstrual Syndrome

Symptoms of this syndrome usually develop during the late luteal phase of the menstrual cycle. Women may experience some of the following symptoms including decreased energy, tension, irritability, anger, food cravings, headache, depression, breast pain, muscle aches and abdominal bloating. Sadly, women who suffer from PMS eat a diet that is far worse than the standard American diet. These women eat far more refined carbohydrates, refined sugar, dairy products, and sodium than average American women. PMS sufferers also ingest far less iron, manganese and zinc. One of the best things to do to improve one's condition is to eat a variety of whole plant based foods in order to get a good dietary intake of iron, manganese and zinc. Regular exercise is equally as important. Studies have indicated that women who engage in regular physical activity do not suffer from PMS as often as sedentary women.

## FEMININE HYGIENE & MENSTRUAL PRODUCTS

- Changes in temperature, skin surface moisture and pH of the vulvar skin may create a favorable environment for pathogens
- The vagina and vulva have mucous membranes that quickly absorb chemicals without metabolizing them
- Many of the chemicals found in feminine hygiene products can interfere with estrogen signaling
- We should avoid the use of parabens, dioxins, bleaching agents and synthetic fibers
- Certified organic cotton products are better
- Tampons should be avoided because they all cause tiny tears in the vagina

Conventional panty liners which have a non-breathable back sheet are widely used, but may cause problems because of changes in temperature, skin surface moisture and pH of the vulvar skin. The changes may create favorable conditions for the growth of harmful bacteria and other pathogens.

Researchers have explored delivering drugs vaginally. Why? Because the vagina and vulva have mucous membranes that quickly absorb chemicals without metabolizing them. This means that chemicals can pass into the blood stream much more quickly and at higher concentrations as compared to chemical exposure via ingestion. However, this poses risks for women who use feminine hygiene products. Many of the chemicals found in feminine hygiene products can interfere with estrogen signaling. Estrogens are a group of hormones that primarily have to do with normal sexual and reproductive development in women. Estrogen affects many different parts of the body including the reproductive tract, urinary tract, the heart and blood vessels, bones, breasts, skin, hair, mucous membranes, pelvic muscles and the brain.

Some chemicals of concern include parabens. These chemicals are used in preservatives, personal lubricants and fragrance ingredients. Some notable parabens include diethyl phthalate and Galaxolide. Plastic applicators may pose risks too because plastic chemicals have been known to leach out of products. Dioxins are chemicals that are present in trace amounts in tampons and pads as a by-product of cotton and wood pulp bleaching. Even background levels of dioxin may lead to developmental delays, birth defects, hormone disruption and immune cell suppression. Dioxin accumulates in body fat and breast milk.

Synthetic products used in high-absorbency tampons may also pose health risks to consumers. Viscose rayon is synthetic fiber which can cause the production of large quantities of toxins. Philip Tierno, a clinical microbiology and pathology professor at New York University has linked toxic shock syndrome to a toxin produced by *Staphylococcus aureus* in the presence of synthetic fiber tampons. In his educated opinion, cotton is the best product for use. One important consideration with regard to the use of cotton should be made. Pesticides have been found in tampons and many of these chemicals are carcinogenic to humans. Tampons should be avoided because all tampons can cause tiny tears in the vagina and thereby provide entry for other chemicals into the blood stream.

According to Jennifer Bogo, Environmental Magazine's managing editor, there are a couple feminine hygiene products that are fairly good. These products include Natracare's non-chlorine, hydrogen peroxide bleached pads, washable Lunapads, Many Moons and Pandora Pads which use no bleach on all organic items. Women should generally look for certified organic products which are free from parabens, dioxins, synthetic fibers and chlorine bleaching agents.

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