HEALTH BASICS

# Vagina

The vagina is an elastic muscular canal connecting the cervix with the outside of the body.

**WHAT IT IS**
elastic muscular canal connecting the cervix to the vulva

**WHERE IT COMES UP**
periods, sex, childbirth, pelvic examinations, and vaginal concerns

**WHY IT MATTERS**
supports menstruation, sexual activity, childbirth, and reproductive health

**WHAT IT IS NOT**
not the vulva and not a disease

**WHO TO ASK**
primary care clinician, gynecologist, or sexual health service

**HOW IT IS CHECKED**
pelvic examination or vaginal swab when medically needed

## Overview

The vagina is a flexible, muscular canal inside the pelvis. It runs from the vaginal opening to the cervix, which is the lower part of the uterus. After some types of hysterectomy, the cervix is absent and the vagina ends in a surgically closed area called the vaginal cuff.

The vagina is not the same as the vulva. The vulva is the external genital area. It includes the labia, clitoris, vaginal opening, and opening of the urethra. Urine leaves through the urethra, not through the vagina.

The vagina has roles in menstruation, some forms of sexual activity, pelvic examinations, and vaginal childbirth. Not everyone with a vagina identifies as a woman. Some people are born with differences in reproductive anatomy, while others have surgery to create or change a vagina.

The vaginal walls usually rest against each other rather than forming a constantly open space. They can stretch when needed. Folds in the walls help the vagina expand during penetration and childbirth.

## How it works

The vaginal wall contains muscle and elastic tissue. Its inner surface is a moist lining rather than skin. The vagina does not contain glands that produce large amounts of its own fluid. Moisture comes mainly through the vaginal wall and from fluids made by the cervix and nearby glands.

Hormones affect this lining. During the reproductive years, estrogen usually helps keep it thicker and more elastic. Estrogen levels can fall during and after menopause, while breastfeeding, or with certain treatments. The lining may then become thinner, drier, or less flexible.

Many microorganisms naturally live in the vagina. These are sometimes called the vaginal microbiome. Lactobacillus bacteria are often prominent and help maintain an acidic environment. This acidity can make it harder for some harmful organisms to grow.

The vaginal environment is not identical in every person or at every stage of life. Hormones, menstruation, semen, medicines, infections, and products placed inside the vagina can affect it.

Normal vaginal fluid helps remove shed cells and mucus. This is why the vagina is often described as self-cleaning. Discharge may change in amount and texture during the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, sexual arousal, or hormonal treatment.

During a period, blood passes from the uterus through the cervix and vagina. During vaginal childbirth, the vagina stretches as part of the birth canal.

## Why it matters for your health

Knowing the difference between the vagina and vulva can help you describe where a concern is located. External itching may involve vulval skin, for example, while an internal swab collects fluid from the vagina. A concern can also involve both areas.

Vaginal discharge is not automatically a sign of illness. Normal discharge is commonly clear or white and does not cause strong odor, itching, or pain. A noticeable change from your usual pattern may be more useful than the amount alone.

The vagina also provides access to the cervix during cervical screening. A speculum is used to gently separate the vaginal walls so a sample can be taken from the cervix. Cervical screening is not a general test for every vaginal condition or sexually transmitted infection.

The hymen is a thin rim or fold of tissue near the vaginal opening. Its shape differs naturally and can change without sexual activity. Looking at the hymen cannot establish whether someone has had vaginal sex. So-called virginity testing has no scientific basis.

## What can go wrong

Several conditions can affect the vagina or cause changes in vaginal fluid.

Vaginitis means inflammation of the vagina. Possible causes include bacterial vaginosis, vulvovaginal candidiasis, and trichomoniasis. Bacterial vaginosis involves a change in the usual balance of vaginal bacteria. Vulvovaginal candidiasis is caused by an overgrowth of Candida yeast. Trichomoniasis is a sexually transmitted infection caused by a parasite.

Other sexually transmitted infections can affect the cervix, vulva, or nearby organs and may cause discharge, bleeding, sores, or pain. These conditions cannot be reliably identified by appearance or odor alone.

Genitourinary syndrome of menopause describes vaginal, vulval, urinary, and sexual changes related to lower estrogen levels. These may include dryness, irritation, pain with penetration, or urinary discomfort. Similar changes can occur during breastfeeding or after treatments that lower estrogen.

Pelvic organ prolapse occurs when pelvic support tissues weaken and an organ presses into or through the vaginal wall. A person may notice pressure or a bulge.

A tampon, condom, menstrual product, or other object can sometimes remain in the vagina. It cannot travel through the cervix into the abdomen, but it may become lodged high in the vaginal canal.

Injury, abnormal tissue, and vaginal cancer can also affect this area. Bleeding after sex or after menopause has several possible causes and deserves medical assessment; it does not by itself show what the cause is.

Arrange routine or prompt medical follow-up for a lasting change in discharge, strong odor, itching, burning, pain, sores, bleeding after sex, or any bleeding after menopause. A clinician may recommend an examination, swab, urine test, pregnancy test, or sexually transmitted infection test.

Seek urgent or emergency care for:

A sexual assault service can also provide confidential medical care, infection testing, pregnancy-related care, and evidence collection if you want it.

- very heavy bleeding, fainting, marked weakness, or trouble breathing
- severe pelvic pain, especially with pregnancy or possible pregnancy
- fever and feeling seriously unwell while using a tampon or internal product
- serious genital injury or an object that cannot be safely removed

- immediate danger or serious injury following sexual assault

## What you can do

Nothing needs to be done to clean inside a healthy vagina. Douching can disturb its usual environment. Scented washes, deodorants, and similar internal products may also cause irritation.

Wash the vulva gently with water. If you use soap, choose a mild, unscented product and keep it on the external skin. Avoid putting cleaning products inside the vagina.

Practical steps include:

Do not use tools to remove an object from the vagina. If gentle removal with clean fingers is not possible, a healthcare service can help.

If you have no concerns, there is no home test needed to "check" the vagina. Pelvic examinations and laboratory tests are used when there is a specific reason or as part of agreed preventive care.

- note when discharge, bleeding, odor, or discomfort began
- record links with periods, sex, new products, or medicines
- follow package instructions for tampons and other internal products
- ask what tests are being offered and what each test can detect
- request sexually transmitted infection testing if exposure is possible
- ask about comfort options if an examination is painful or worrying

## Common questions

Can a tampon get lost inside the body?

No. The cervix blocks passage from the vagina into the uterus. A tampon can move high enough to be difficult to reach, however. Seek help if you cannot remove it.

Does the vagina need special cleaning?

Usually not. Normal fluid helps clear mucus and shed cells. Clean the external vulva gently, but do not douche inside the vagina.

Is all discharge abnormal?

No. Clear or white discharge can be normal, and its amount may change through the menstrual

cycle. Seek assessment for a new strong odor, unusual color, blood, itching, burning, or pain.

Can an examination show whether someone has had sex?

No. There is no valid examination that can prove whether someone has had vaginal intercourse. Hymen appearance is not reliable evidence of sexual activity.

Does vaginal stretching make it permanently "loose"?

The vaginal tissues are designed to stretch and recover. Age, childbirth, hormones, pelvic floor function, surgery, and individual anatomy can affect sensation or support. A clinician or pelvic health physiotherapist can assess persistent pressure, a bulge, leakage, or sexual discomfort.

## Sources

- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. "Vulvovaginal Health." Patient FAQ190
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Sexually Transmitted Infections Treatment Guidelines, 2021 . Sections on vaginal discharge, bacterial vaginosis, vulvovaginal candidiasis, and trichomoniasis
- National Health Service. "Vaginitis." NHS health information
- World Health Organization, United Nations Human Rights, and UN Women. Eliminating Virginity Testing: An Interagency Statement . 2018
- National Cancer Institute. "Vaginal Cancer Treatment-Patient Version." PDQ Cancer Information Summary
- StatPearls Publishing. "Anatomy, Abdomen and Pelvis: Female Internal Genitals." NCBI Bookshelf