A close-up photograph of a woman's hands holding a single, ripe red strawberry. The hands are positioned in front of her white, lace-trimmed underwear, which is pulled down to her thighs. The background is a soft, out-of-focus skin tone. The overall lighting is warm and intimate.

# *Get smart about* vaginal health

What's actually going  
on down there?

by Sarah Ban

Your vagina is a key part of your reproductive system—the passage to life. Whether or not pregnancy is in your future, taking good care of your vagina is part and parcel of whole-body wellbeing. Equip yourself with the most essential facts first, starting here.

## The key characteristics of a healthy vagina

First, let's get microscopic. Just like your gut, your vagina hosts its own microbiome, an ecosystem of fungi and beneficial bacteria. A healthy vagina has a proper balance of bacteria, according to Mary Jane Minkin, MD, OB-GYN, clinical professor of obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive sciences at Yale University School of Medicine.

Minkin explains that, when the vagina is in good shape, there should be no odor. (If there is any detectable smell, it should be subtle or earthy—not unpleasant in any way.) Normal discharge will be clear or white (or both), although it can increase during ovulation.

The vagina should also maintain a slightly acidic pH—between 3.8 and 5.0. "A good acidic pH in the vagina will make the vagina a not-friendly place for the bad-guy bacteria," Minkin says. You can check your vaginal pH with an at-home test or a visit with a healthcare professional.

## Signs your vagina needs help

The clearest sign that your vagina might be infected is the smell. "The major 'bad' odor that women are aware of they describe as a 'fishy' odor—or when it's really bad, 'dead fish,'" says Minkin. Other signs include a change in discharge, such as odor or color (gray, green, or off-white), itching or redness around the vulva, pain during sexual intercourse, or bleeding.

## Common vaginal issues—and their causes

### VAGINOSIS

If you do notice any unusual symptoms, you might have bacterial vaginosis. This occurs when the slightly acidic pH of the vagina is disrupted, the good bacteria cannot survive, and other bacteria spread. One way vaginal pH gets altered is when less acidic fluids, such as semen or period blood, get into the vagina.

### TRICHOMONIASIS

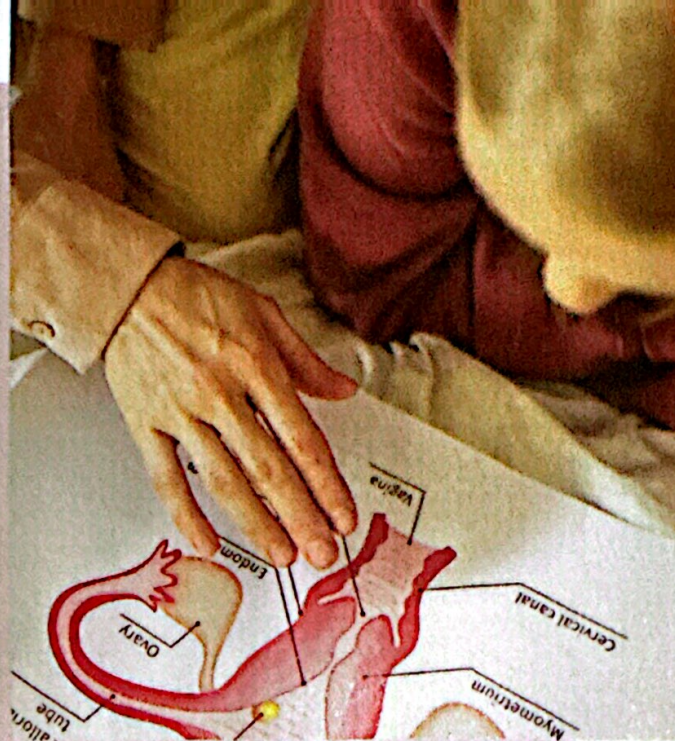
There's also trichomoniasis, a sexually transmitted infection caused by a parasite. Bacterial vaginosis and trichomoniasis are the two infections most classically associated with odors, says Minkin.

### YEAST INFECTIONS

Yeast infections occur when the fungi in your vaginal microbiome begin to multiply, causing redness, irritation, or discharge often described as cottage cheese. Minkin adds that yeast infections usually have no abnormal smell.

### DRYNESS AND PAIN

Another issue many people face is vaginal dryness or pain. This is typically first discovered when intercourse becomes painful or causes light bleeding, or when it burns to urinate. Dryness is typically caused by a decrease in estrogen, which is the hormone responsible for the natural lubrication and elasticity of the vagina.



## FIRST PERIOD?

Here are three tips for having "the talk" with your children:

- > Talk about it with neutrality like just another normal function of the body, such as peeing. Your neutrality will show them it's nothing to be ashamed of.
- > Underscore that no questions are off-limits. Pre-teens are bombarded by so much information—the facts should come from you. If they don't want to speak to you, point them in the right direction, whether it's your gynecologist, a book, or an older friend you trust.
- > Prepare them for pain. Yes, the bleeding itself is an inconvenience, but teach them about what they can do when they experience cramps, bloating, and moodiness.

**Note:** The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that females make their gynecology first visit between 13 to 15 years old (or earlier if there's an issue).



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## PROBIOTICS FOR VAGINAL HEALTH

Turns out taking capsules full of beneficial bacteria can help maintain a healthy pH and vaginal microbiome! Look for a supplement containing *Lactobacillus crispatus* and *Lactobacillus rhamnosus*, both of which have been proven in clinical trials to support a healthy vagina.

## VULVA OR VAGINA?

Commonly used incorrectly, the vagina and vulva are different integral parts of the female reproductive system. The vagina is a stretchy, muscular canal that is an important part of your *internal* reproductive system, whereas the vulva includes all *external* genitalia, from your clitoris and urethra, to the vaginal opening and perineum. Understanding this key difference is essential to understanding your reproductive and sexual health and well-being.

## Keeping your vagina healthy

So what can you do to prevent irritation or funky odors as much as possible?

### KEEP IT CLEAN

You *should* clean your vagina, but only with water. If you've ever heard that the vagina is “self-cleaning,” it's true: the healthy bacteria keeps it clean. “The vagina and the vulva truly don't need scrubbing or...heavy-duty deodorants,” Minkin says. “And you don't want to use deodorants in the area, or anything with perfumes, which can irritate.”

### KEEP YOUR VULVA COOL AND DRY

Warmth and humidity foster bacteria overgrowth. Avoid wearing too-tight pants and remove sweaty or wet clothes right away. Don't use pads when you're not on your period, as the material keeps the area moist, and make sure to change them regularly when you're on your cycle.

### PRACTICE RESPONSIBLE SEX

If you don't have a monogamous partner who's also been tested for STIs, use condoms. Use lubrication to minimize the chances of chafing and damage to vaginal tissues. ■

## WHAT'S THE MOST VULVA-FRIENDLY UNDERWEAR?

The word is in. “Wearing white cotton underwear is the best to avoid irritation,” says Mary Jane Minkin, MD, OB-GYN, clinical professor of obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive sciences at Yale University School of Medicine.