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WELLBEING

**Vaginal Health: Is Everything All Right Down There?**  
SMW Women's Health & Fitness Tips  
By Tracy Morris



Single women preen. We inspect our nails, our hair, our faces. Our breasts and (depending on how well your torso twists) butts get the once-over regularly, too. How familiar are we with what's between our legs? I'll be frank — there are times in my life when I've gone longer than desired without the company of someone else who might inspect those folds and crevices "down there." Okay, maybe the thought of being inspected is about as hot as visualizing your annual 'well woman' exam from the practitioner's perspective. But let's be honest — when something's amiss, an intimate partner is at least handy for keeping you self-vigilant, if not exactly giving you a detailed report from down south. During those times when you feel like letting it all go — you know, when shaving goes out the window longer than usual — it's still important to keep an eye on things... down there.

How many euphemisms can I come up with before I finally blurt out vulva and vagina? So — just because you're not entertaining someone else with your personal set of nature's party props, that doesn't mean you can ignore the health of your love muffin. The key to maintaining good health in any region is knowing what your baseline is — that is, what's normal for your body.

One of my favorite sexperts, Dr. Carol Queen, explains the importance of touching yourself regularly: "Many women, regardless of whether or not they have a current sexual relationship with someone else, attend to their genital health with occasional looks (using a hand mirror and enough light to illuminate), via grooming (do you feel anything unusual as you shave or trim?), and via touch during masturbation."

Dr. Queen continues, "Most problems will be noticeable because they alter your sensations (with pain or itching, often, or with changes in your sexual response or feelings) or cause other kinds of genital change — for instance, if you know how your vaginal fluids usually smell, you'll know if that changes, and you can also look for a different consistency or greater discharge."

Let's Get Technical

Wouldn't you love to have a job where all you do is talk about sex every day? I called up Dr. Beth Jordan who is the lucky Medical Director of the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals. The ARHP is a non-profit dedicated to educating not only patients but health care professionals. We decided this would be one interview that would not be conducted by speakerphone, lest my third-grade son be in earshot.

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I pelted Dr. Jordan with questions about women's genital health and what even the celibate among us should know about our hoochies.



Dr. Beth Jordan

How can a woman tell if her girl-place is in good shape?

"The problem is that so many women still don't know what to expect, thanks to our lack of good sex ed," Dr. Jordan says. "Families don't talk about sexual issues. The media gets involved in promoting misinformation, for example, with douching products."

She says women express more concern about their vaginal discharge than anything else. "Feminine" product manufacturers prey upon our lack of knowledge about what's normal. In fact, things like douches and sprays can lead to increased risk for infection and even pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), a common cause of infertility.

- Here's a handy list to tape to your powder room wall:
- Painful urination
- Foul odor
- Green or otherwise unusual color discharge
- Itching
- Burning
- Pain
- Lesions, sores, bumps, blisters, new indentations in your skin
- Pigmented moles


Any of the above occurrences — anywhere from your mons pubis to your labia to your anus — might indicate a need to schedule some stirrup time with your favorite doctor.

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