

**Female Anatomy: Your Ultimate Guide**

**Sex ed didn't cover the half of it. From little-known facts to tips on safe handling, here's everything you need to know about your pink parts**

By Nicole Beland, Photography By Jill Greenberg

Female Anatomy: Your Ultimate Guide Sex ed didn't cover the half of it. From little-known facts to tips on safe handling, here's everything you need to know about your pink parts 

That's right, we're shining a spotlight on the almighty vajayjay. And it's about time. Given the ridiculous amount of maintenance it requires — [gynecologist](http://www.womenshealthmag.com/health/obgyn-questions-6) visits, bikini waxes, Monistat, and more — you'd think we'd know everything about this attention-getting organ's intricate design and how to keep it running smoother than a top-of-the-line Lexus. Yet even women who feel perfectly comfortable in their skin don't give much thought to the nooks and crannies of their pink parts. "Many women never connect with their sexual anatomy because of our society's 'keep away' attitude toward the vagina and vulva," says Elizabeth Stewart, M.D., author of *The V Book*.

The following guide to a healthy honeypot explains a few things you might still wonder about, like why discharge varies during your cycle and the secret to finding the nerve-packed hot spots that make intercourse feel as good as a clitoral rubdown. And we bet you know someone who could benefit from some pelvic area info as much — if not more — than you, so be sure to leave this story out where he can see it. For a visual guide, dig deeper with *WH*'s [**"The Ultimate Guide to Your Vagina"**](http://www.womenshealthmag.com/files/vagina-guide/index.html)

**The VIP Lounge**

Most people call the whole kit and caboodle between a woman's legs the "vagina." But the compendium of visible outer parts is technically the "vulva." Meant to keep dirt and bacteria out while providing a welcoming environment for worthy partygoers, the [vulva](http://www.womenshealthmag.com/sex-and-relationships/sex-alert-painful-sex-could-be-a-serious-health-concern) is like a VIP lounge where the clitoris is the DJ. "The labia majora [outer lips] are a protective layer of fat covered by skin and hair," says Lillian Schapiro, M.D., an Atlanta ob-gyn. Their job is to keep sex comfy even if your partner's pelvis is bonier than Iggy Pop's. Located inside the labia majora (though sometimes extending beyond them), the labia minora, or inner lips, act like a pair of swinging doors guarding the entrance to the vagina and the urethra, the tube that leads from the bladder. "The labia minora are much thinner than the labia majora and even more sensitive," Dr. Schapiro says. Plus, they contain erectile tissue, made up of clusters of tiny blood vessels, which means they become slightly stiffer (though not as stiff as the clitoris) during arousal. The anatomist who named the parts of the vulva must have found it loungelike too, because the area between and including the inner folds of the labia minora is called the "vestibule."

**Your Sprinkler System**

Hiding just below the skin of the labia and clitoral hood (called the prepuce) are hundreds of small glands that secrete oil and sweat to protect these delicate areas from friction and overheating. That means it's normal if the crotch of your yoga pants is soaked by the end of a workout. The inside of the vagina also stays moist to maintain healthy tissue, but as you've no doubt noticed, it gets wetter when you're turned on. That's because the lining of the vagina fills with blood during arousal, causing the salt water in blood plasma to push through the vaginal wall. The Bartholin's glands — on either side of the vaginal opening — also pump out a few beads of slippery mucus. In missionary position, most of this fluid collects in the back of the vagina and fails to lubricate the opening, making sex uncomfortable. Unfortunately, in some women, lubrication occurs for only a few moments, then stops. In both cases, a water-based personal lubricant is key to ensuring a smooth entry.

**Pleats and Ruffles**

Like an haute-couture handbag, the vulva and vagina feature a variety of textures. Most of the vulva is smooth, but some women's labia minora have a ruffled appearance. "Labia come in all shapes and sizes," Dr. Stewart says. "The tips of the nipples and labia are similar because they both contain small, bumpy-looking glands." Examine your labia minora closely (using a hand mirror) and you may see the glands, which sometimes look like tiny pimples. Separate the labia minora and you may notice that the entrance to the vagina also has a ruffled border or just a few irregular bits of skin. Those are the remnants of the hymen, a thin membrane that once partially covered the entrance but has been torn or pushed aside by sexual intercourse. As for the texture inside the vagina, it's full of bumpy ridges called rugae. Similar to pleats on a skirt, the rugae stretch and retract to accommodate objects ranging in size from super-slender tampons to roly-poly 8-pound babies.

**Finding the Wishbone**

In a body full of hardworking organs, the clitoris is like a trust-fund baby who does nothing but party. It's the only part of the human body whose sole purpose is pleasure. The one thing the clitoris has that a trust-fund baby lacks? Depth. "The clitoris is larger than it seems," says Laura Berman, Ph.D., clinical assistant professor of ob-gyn and psychiatry at Northwestern University's medical school and author of *The Passion Prescription*. Beneath the visible pink button, called the glans, lies a wishbone-shaped structure comprising a shaft, which extends about an inch up toward the pubic bone, and two 3\*inch arms called crura that reach down and back toward the pelvic bone in an inverted V shape. Though the shaft and crura send pleasure signals to the brain during sex, the glans is more sensitive. That's why it has a hood — without it, a pair of tight jeans would send your nervous system into overdrive.

Two bulbs of erectile tissue run alongside the crura. Many experts, including Berman and Helen O'Connell, M.D., a urologist at Royal Melbourne Hospital in Australia and the first person to map the clitoris using magnetic resonance imaging, believe that this tissue is part of the clitoris too. In studies, Dr. O'Connell found that the clitoris is also connected to erectile tissue surrounding the urethra and **Over the Hedge**

Before you shave or wax it into a perfect triangle, landing strip, or lucky shamrock, the hair that covers the pubic mound and outer labia grows in a pattern called the escutcheon (based on the Latin term for an ornamental shield).

When allowed to grow wild, some escutcheons will wander up toward the navel and down toward the upper thighs, while others wouldn't breech the borders of a Brazilian bikini. The shape of hair shafts differs depending on ethnicity: In Asian women they're typically round, in women of African descent they're elliptical, and in Caucasians and Latinas they range between the two. "Elliptical shafts are more likely to become ingrown after shaving or waxing as the hair curls in, pierces the skin, and creates a bump," says Susan Taylor, M.D., a Philadelphia dermatologist and author of Brown Skin. "A depilatory breaks the hair at the surface, which can make ingrowns less likely, but only if the chemicals don't irritate your skin." Whenever you try a new depilatory, always spot-test the product on your inner thigh before using it on your bikini area. Another way to create an aesthetically pleasing patch is with laser hair removal, but only by a trained professional who uses a laser like the Nd:YAG, which Dr. Taylor says won't create dark spots by damaging surrounding skin.

**X Marks the Spot**

While the vagina is nowhere near as responsive to touch as the vulva, it does contain hundreds of nerve endings. If a woman were lying on her back with a clock placed upright inside the lower part of her vagina (don't ask how it got there), the most sensitive area would be at 12 o'clock, right behind the urethra. In a 1982 study of more than 400 women, Rutgers University sex researcher Beverly Whipple, Ph.D., and two colleagues found that when this area was stimulated after a woman was already sexually aroused, a dime-size bump of tissue appeared and could sometimes trigger an orgasm. She named the area the G-spot after Ernst Grafenberg, the German doctor who first documented it in 1950. Further examination of this spongy tissue found it identical to that of the male prostate gland, a well-established pleasure zone. Some doctors believe the G-spot should be renamed the female prostate. Supporting that belief is a study showing the similarity between the fluid expelled by a very small percentage of women through their urethra during a G-spot orgasm (aka female ejaculation) and that produced by the male prostate. What if you've never found your G-spot, much less ejaculated? Whipple says don't sweat it: "There are many sensitive areas inside the vagina that, when stimulated by a finger, vibrator, or penis, can contribute to sexual pleasure."extending up to the front wall of the vagina — where the enigmatic G-spot has been known to pop up.

**Honorable Discharge**

That strip of cotton in the crotch of every panty is there for a reason — even if you're not on your period or the tiniest bit sweaty, it will collect moisture. The vulva and vagina produce an average of 1 to 2 grams of vaginal discharge (or about 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon) every 8 hours. But even normal discharge doesn't make a pretty picture. "It may be clear, white, or yellow, and fluid, waxy, stringy, or clumpy," Dr. Stewart says. Some of it is a buildup of the oil that the glands in your vulva produce. Some is cervical mucus. Still more comes from normal vaginal secretions. Throw a sample under a microscope and you'll also find bacteria, skin cells, and yeast spores. Quantity and consistency change over the menstrual cycle. "During ovulation, secretions are thinner and more plentiful," Dr. Stewart says. "After ovulation, discharge becomes thicker. As you near menstruation, there's less." How do you keep this fluid factory fresh? Don't mess with it. "The vagina cleans itself. Over-the-counter products can make matters worse, since the protective bacterial balance will be further disrupted," Berman says. "If discharge smells bad or is accompanied by discomfort, see your doctor." Wash with water and a perfume-free, pH-balanced soap like Dove, Berman says. Always wear cotton undies and go commando at night or whenever possible. That's right: Unless you're wearing something that could chafe or otherwise irritate you down under, docs are big fans of a panty-free lifestyle.

**Tilt-a-Whirl**

As seen on the diagram in every Tampax box, the vagina tilts back 30 degrees from the opening, which is why you're supposed to aim toward your lower back when pushing the plunger. A side effect of this 30degree angle is that in missionary position, the penis has little to no contact with the super-sensitive front wall of the vagina. As far as orgasm goes, this is not good. Placing a pillow under your hips, wrapping your legs around your partner's lower back, and rocking back and forth to create clitoral friction can help you get maximum bliss out of missionary, but other positions typically yield better results. "The best positions for G-spot stimulation include woman-on-top and rear entry," Berman says. Woman-on-top lets you experiment with different angles to find the most feel-good sensations. "Leaning back targets the anterior wall," Berman says. Zero in on your G-spot in rear entry by lying flat on your stomach and tucking a pillow under your hips. Or try reverse cowgirl, where you face his feet — and with that view, he'll be one very happy cowboy.

**The Big Squeeze**

You've heard of sex-enhancing Kegel exercises: Squeeze the muscle you'd use to stop urine midflow (except don't actually do it while you're peeing, since that can cause bladder infections), hold it for as long as you can, release, and repeat. But perhaps you haven't seen Berman's vaginal barbells. Neither had we. For beginners, there's the Isis, which looks like a slim, clear plastic bow tie with smooth, rounded edges. And for women with power vaginas (Asia Argento? Shakira? Condi Rice?), there's the Juno, a plastic rod containing four spherical, 0.3- to 1.5-ounce weights in a row from smallest to largest (you'll find both for sale at [My Pleasure](http://mypleasure.com/)). Start by inserting the bigger end in your vagina, tightening your pelvic floor muscles around it, and holding it in place with your hand. You'll know your muscles are getting stronger when you can hold the smaller end in your vagina with no hand support. "Just like other muscles, strengthening pelvic floor muscles is more effective when you add resistance," Berman says. "Over time, using the Isis or Juno leads to improved vaginal tone and enhanced arousal and orgasm ability." But even without resistance, Kegels make a real difference; according to Dr. Stewart, if you squeeze out 10 to 20 daily, you'll sense stronger orgasms in about 3 months.

**Friendly Invaders**

Inside your vagina reside trillions of bacteria, some friendly, some not so friendly. "*Lactobacillus* is a beneficial bacteria that keeps nastier bacteria in check," says Christopher A. Czaja, M.D., an infectious disease fellow at the University of Washington at Seattle. "Classic urinary tract infections often occur when the number of *Lactobacillus* drops and *E. coli* bacteria [often present in the vagina] start to flourish and ascend the urethra." Yech. To prevent *E. coli* from migrating into the vagina from the other side of the 'hood, always wipe from front to back after going to the bathroom. Besides bullying bacterial bad boys like *E. coli*, *Lactobacillus* also crowds out yeast spores, another normal inhabitant of the vagina, which can otherwise grow to the level of an itchy infection. Keep your Lactobacillus count up by eating a daily cup of yogurt that contains the bacteria and avoiding unnecessary antibiotics, which kill off the good guys along with the bad. (For more information, see "[It's Alive!](http://www.womenshealthmag.com/nutrition/benefits-of-yogurt)")

**Strings Attached**

As tender as the vagina may seem, it's actually a pretty tough cookie. When it sustains small scrapes from, say, enthusiastic booty, the vaginal lining can heal surprisingly fast. Another way it gets beat up is by improper use of super-absorbency tampons. This is different than scary toxic shock syndrome, a rare, dangerous condition (odds of getting it are about 1 in 100,000) that results from an overgrowth of *Staphylococcus aureus* bacteria. The staph bug can be exacerbated by wearing the same tampon for longer than 8 hours — but is not actually caused by tampons themselves. (The best way to avoid TSS, besides changing your tampon regularly, is making sure that only clean hands and objects come in contact with your cooch.)

What tampons can give you are vaginal ulcers that don't cause any discomfort but do make you more vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections. "Using a high-absorbency tampon during light flow days or when spotting can draw too much fluid out of the vagina, damaging cells and causing them to erode," Dr. Stewart says. The good news is that the vaginal lining is quick to produce new cells, allowing ulcers to heal completely in as little as 48 hours. To prevent vaginal stress, avoid super-absorbency tampons on all but your heaviest days and don't use them at all between periods.

**Vagus, Baby**

Many lucky-as-hell women report experiencing three different kinds of orgasms (four if you include the faux-gasm): one that radiates from the clitoris and feels a little bit superficial, a more satisfying one that happens deeper inside the vagina, and an even bigger bang that's a divine blend of the two. Makes sense, considering that our brains receive pleasure signals through as many as four sensory fields. According to *The Science of Orgasm*, a new book coauthored by Whipple, Barry Komisaruk, Ph.D., and Carlos Beyer-Flores, Ph.D., clitoral stimulation sends tingles up the pudendal nerve; sensations inside the vagina travel up the pelvic nerve; and pleasurable contact with the cervix activates the pelvic, hypogastric, and vagus nerves.

That last link — between the cervix and the vagus nerve, which controls activities as seemingly unrelated as swallowing and sweating — is a new one that Whipple's team discovered during a clinical study of women with spinal cord injuries. "We don't yet know if it's a supplemental tract that the genitals normally use to send messages to the spinal cord or if it's activated only if the spinal cord is cut off by injury," Dr. Stewart says. But one thing the involvement of the vagus nerve makes clear is that female orgasm is just as mysterious on the inside as it can seem from out here.

**Your Private Parts: A Lesson In Female Anatomy**

**Get to know your pink parts. Experts say it will improve your health and help you have better sex. So don't be shy**

By Theresa O'Rourke, Photography By Dan Forbes

Your Private Parts: A Lesson In Female Anatomy Get to know your pink parts. Experts say it will improve your health and help you have better sex. So don't be shy 

**Humor us for a sec:**
If the average woman had a Facebook page for her private parts (we know, shut up), odds are her relationship status would be "it's complicated," and she'd desperately need to post a profile picture. After all, new research from the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at Indiana University suggests that she hasn't checked herself out much—only 26 percent of women look closely at their lady bits. Hey, we get it. Guys have it so much easier. Their junk is hanging out there, just waiting to be experienced. Most of our parts are internal, so we can't exactly see what we're working with.

Well, here's some incentive to change all that: The more you make your vagina your business, the more pleasure you'll experience. In a separate study published in the International Journal of Sexual Health, scientists found that women who had a positive view of their genitals were more comfortable in their skin, more apt to orgasm, and more likely to experiment in bed. Ding-ding-ding rings the pleasure bell! In fact, just looking at your goodies can be a turn-on. "Research shows that seeing signs of sex helps inspire arousal and lubrication," says Debby Herbenick, Ph.D., a research scientist at Indiana University and the author of *Because It Feels Good*. So allow us to scroll down there, if you will, for a better view. Oh, and when we're done, you might want to update your status.

**PRIVATE INVESTIGATION**
To start, let's clear up one of the biggest misconceptions about the vagina. It's not the entire genital area. If you're standing [naked](http://www.lookbetternakedbook.com/set/?keycode=142686) in front of a full-length mirror, you're actually seeing your vulva, the exterior portion of your privates, which was covered in hair before your aesthetician went hog wild with the wax and muslin.

Think of your privates as an award-winning cast: You have your supporting actors (the vulva) and your marquee stars (the clitoris and G-spot). Every part is there to entertain your sexual needs, but to milk the best performance out of each one, you have to show them all a little love and attention. So lock the bedroom door, kick off your shoes, and grab a hand mirror.

Without even spreading your legs, you'll see your pubic mound and two folds of skin called the labia majora (the outer lips). Both contain layers of fatty tissue that protect your clitoris and vagina. While pleasure reception is typically weak in this area, manual play can help increase the signal. "Rubbing the pubic mound and outer lips readies the clitoris for stimulation," says Herbenick.

Now, if you gently push apart the outer lips, you'll reveal a thinner set of lips called the labia minora. These hairless babies are loaded with blood vessels, nerve endings, and secreting glands. "To the naked eye, the glands may look like tiny bumps," says Diana Hoppe, M.D., author of Healthy Sex Drive, Healthy You. "They release secretions that actually help to separate your lips for easier penetration."

But they're not the only things lubing up your nether regions. When you spread the labia minora apart, you'll encounter Bartholin's glands (which are microscopic, so you can't actually see them with the naked eye) on each side of your vaginal opening. As you become aroused, these glands lubricate the outer portion of the vaginal canal. They typically release only a small amount of moisture, which is why so many women need plenty of foreplay to stay wet.

**WELCOME TO THE PLEASURE CENTER**
Here's where the clitoris comes in. She's that proud little pink nub, roughly the size of a pencil eraser, and she's there only for sexual pleasure. The girl's got some nerve—approximately 8,000 nerve endings, to be exact, the largest number found in the entire body and double the amount found in the glans of a man's penis, says Hoppe. Of course, that number makes her crazy sensitive, but you already knew that. What you probably didn't know is that she's got legs. Literally. "We see only the head of the clitoris," says Herbenick. But it has a body that's shaped like a wishbone, with two legs (called crura) that reach three inches into the vagina, just under the pubic mound and straight into G-spot territory (but more on that later). This gives the clitoris incredible sexual reach and depth. "It's the powerhouse of the orgasm," says Ian Kerner, Ph.D., author of She Comes First. "It connects with every single structure in the genitals."

The best way to make the clitoris happy is through direct, consistent, yet gentle oral or manual stimulation. But it's also quite responsive to woman-on-top and during a twist on missionary called the coital alignment technique, says Herbenick. In this position, your guy enters you as he normally would during missionary, with two simple tweaks: He inches his body up until his shoulders rest above yours and the base of his penis directly hits your clitoris. Then he grinds in a circular motion instead of thrusting, which "creates more friction against the clitoris," explains Herbenick.

Friction can feel fabulous, but sometimes the little starlet can be a touch overexposed. As you head toward climax, "the clitoris swells in size, which can make friction painful," says Hoppe. Some women report that clitoral stimulation at this point can feel like an irritating tickle, and in some cases, like a really sharp shock. To protect itself, the clitoris retreats back under the protective awning of the clitoral hood. Often, simply lightening up the stimulation a bit will make it feel good again.

An overly sensitive clitoris is your body's way of saying, "Let the vagina soak up some of the sexual spotlight, please!" The four- to seven-inch canal (it varies depending on the woman) can't hold a candle to the clitoris in the nerve-ending department. But it does boast a bunch, says Hoppe. The first two to three inches of the vagina "have hundreds of nerve endings and are majorly sensitive," she says. "That's why when a woman is giving birth and the baby is crowning, they call it the 'ring of fire.'" To stimulate these first few inches of your vaginal canal, try shorter, shallower thrusting during sex.

**WHAT LIES BENEATH**
Deeper into the vaginal walls, you'll find one of the vagina's trickiest trump cards: the G-spot. If the clitoris is famous, the G-spot is infamous. Not every woman can tap into its potential, but if you do, the rewards are phenomenal.

The G-spot is a spongy area about the size of a nickel, and it's located an inch or two into the anterior wall of the vagina, just under the pubic mound--and you've got to feel it to believe it. It has bumpy, knotty striations similar to a walnut, and it demands a hands-on, tough-love approach. "The G-spot's nerves are contained in fattier tissue, so you have to provide deeper, firmer pressure to stimulate it," says Kerner. For starters, you should already be really turned on before it's accessed. That's because the tissue doesn't swell and make itself known until you've enjoyed proper foreplay.

G-spot stimulation also calls for a tag-team approach. You can hit it by having your guy enter you from behind, but the best bet is to have him go down on you with his tongue and fingers. "With his mouth on your clitoris, have him use his fingers in a come-hither motion to apply firm, rhythmic pressure to the G-spot," says Kerner. Put those two together and it's like they're high-fiving each other for a job well done.

If you haven't had what you think is a G-spot orgasm, don't stress over it. (For the record, orgasms that originate in this zone generally feel expansive and deep, while orgasms that start in the clitoris often feel more acute and intense.) "Many women say the G-spot enhances their orgasm," says Kerner. "They wouldn't isolate it and say, 'Wow, I just had a G-spot orgasm.' It's more like, 'I just had an orgasm, and what he was doing felt really good.' That's why most vibrators come with a clitoral stimulator and a G-spot stimulator. They work in tandem to create what's commonly referred to as a blended orgasm." While you can have a clitoral orgasm without G-spot stimulation, it's a little trickier to achieve the reverse. But ultimately, it doesn't matter where it's coming from—at the end of the day, an orgasm is an orgasm. And they all feel amazing.

**Down-There Myths**
It's time for these tall tales to bounce.

**"It smells bad down there."**
Of all the myths, this is the one that really pisses off the experts—especially because it keeps women from accepting and enjoying oral sex, the prime gateway to orgasm. "We are overly sensitive and insecure about the smell of our vaginas," says sex educator Logan Levkoff, Ph.D., author of *Third Base Ain't What It Used to Be*. "And we are far harder on it than any partner would be." Experts chalk it up to years of douche advertisements and the perception that vaginas should smell like rosewater. Um, they don't. Every woman has her own unique scent, but most of us have a musky smell that men are biologically wired to be attracted to, says Lissa Rankin, M.D. "Your scent may change from day to day, depending on how hot the weather is, what you ate, and when you last showered." That said, it's good to know what you smell like on an average day so that you can pinpoint any changes. A fishy smell, for instance, could be a sign of an infection called bacterial vaginosis.

**"They all look the same."**
Like any other body part, the vagina and vulva have basic shapes, but there is quite a bit of variation in coloration, symmetry, and pubic hair patterns. The biggest variation is in the labia minora, says Debby Herbenick, Ph.D. "Studies in which the lips have been measured have found up to 150 percent difference from one woman to another." Translation: Labial size can vary by up to an inch and a half.

**"It can be too tight or too loose."**
Unless a woman is a virgin or she's had a traumatic birthing experience with multiple children, there aren't big anatomical differences in vaginal canals, says Herbenick. Usually, feeling too tight or loose is a matter of lubrication. If you're too wet, there's not enough friction. If you're too dry, almost any penis will feel huge. Always have a tube of lube within reach if you tend to be dry, or a hand towel nearby if you get sopping wet. Granted, women who've had several vaginal deliveries might feel slightly looser, because some nerve endings have been destroyed, says Diana Hoppe, M.D. But Kegels can help strengthen the pelvic floor and muscles surrounding the vagina. "To do them, squeeze to contract the vaginal muscles for two seconds, then relax. Repeat for 10 minutes whenever you're waiting somewhere," she says.

**"You can lose stuff in it."**
Think your tampon went AWOL? No need to call the search-and-rescue squad. "Women seem to have this concept that the vagina is some never-ending tube that goes into the lungs," says Rankin. "But the vagina is like a sock. It goes only so far in length, so you can pull out anything that gets stuck." The cervix is a microscopic hole, and only a sperm can slip through there and make itself at home in the uterus. Anything else will hit a roadblock. Thank God.