



CONTRIBUTION

WOMAN'S VAGINAL HEALTH

An owner's guide to care and maintenance – do not mess with a good thing!

An elegant system

The vagina is not just a nice place to visit or own, nor is it only a passive space waiting for performance. It is a complex, integrated environment. Your vagina is a dynamic ecological system with security arrangements to maintain its health.

Vaginal Ecology

Vaginal ecology is the study of the environment and its interactions. With the understanding of ecology, you can keep your vagina happy and healthy by supporting the natural systems.

Nice and normal

A normal vagina is kept constantly moist by its smooth and slippery natural surface. The smell and taste of a healthy vagina is mild, earthy and slightly pungent with a pleasant, musky aroma.

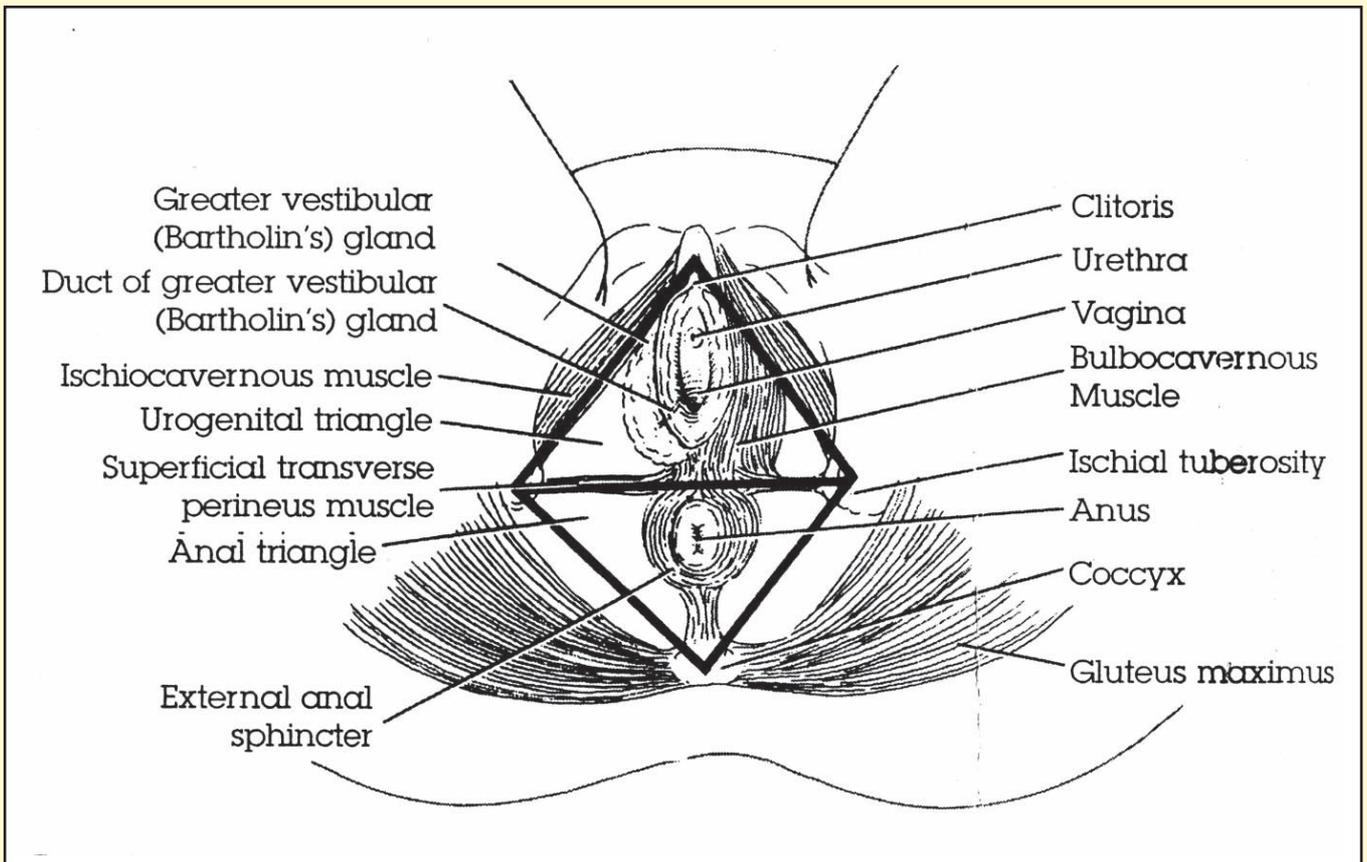
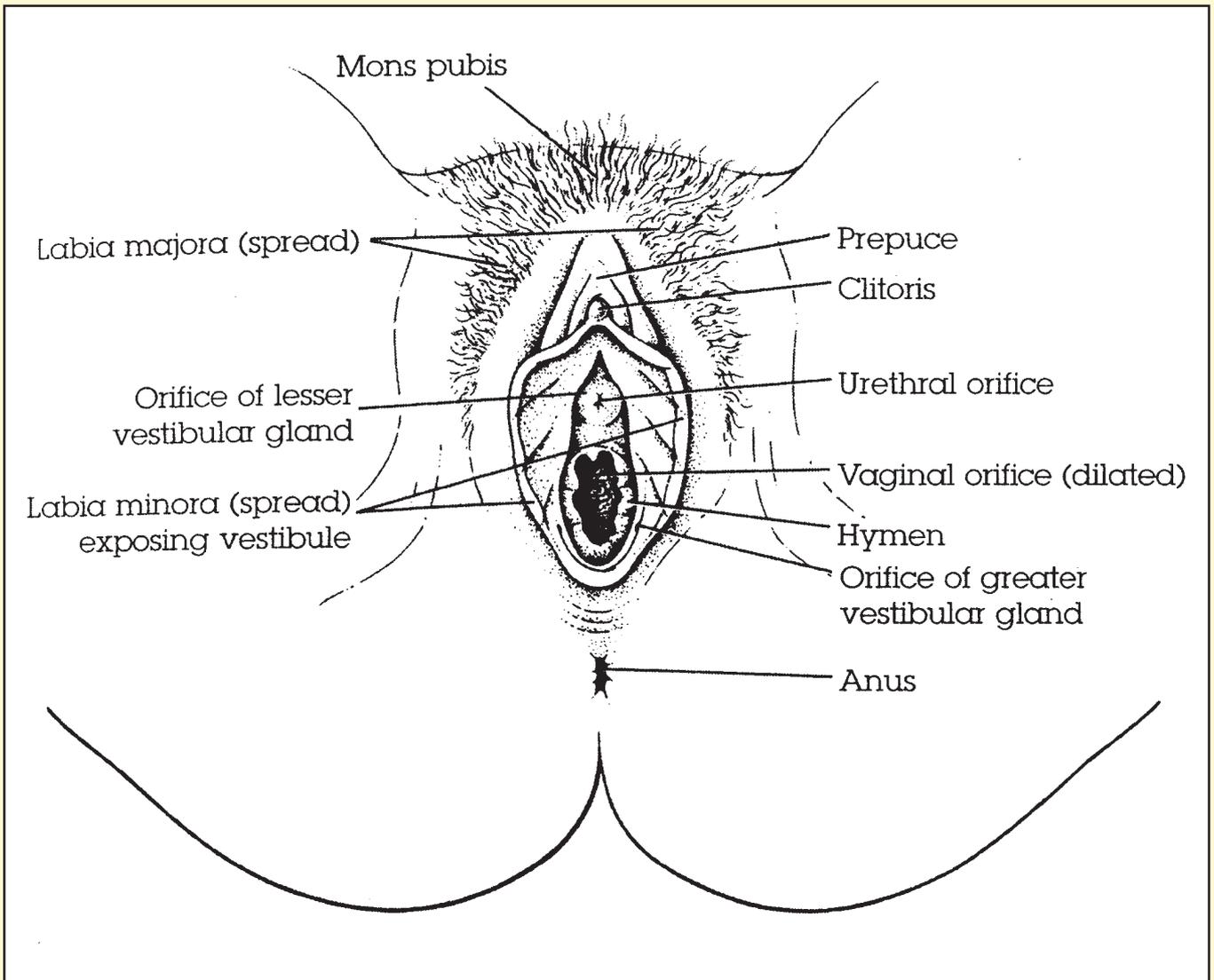
Juicy quality

Vaginal liquid comes mostly from the cells along the walls, which act like sweat glands and the production of moisture from the inner membranes.

The rest of the juice is made up of small contributions from several types of glands, located in the cervical and near the vaginal opening. Normal vaginal fluid varies in colour from clear, white, although when it dries it may appear yellowish. The amount differs from one woman to another. Women will also notice different amounts at different times and the fluid ranges from scarce to moderate. Some women are naturally moist or dry. This is similar to people who have oily skin or dry skin, or who sweat more or less profusely.

What's most important for you to know is what is typical for you in amount, colour, texture and smell. The vaginal fluid reflects where you are in your cycle, your age, your sexual arousal, hormonal contraceptive use, including your diet and fluid intake. For women who are not taking any form of contraceptives, most women are juiciest during the week up to and including the day of ovulation.

Girls before puberty, breast-feeding mothers and post-menopausal women are drier and less varying.



A healthy vagina is full of friendly bacteria, especially a special strain of *Lactobacillus Acidophilus*. These good bacteria protect the vagina and keep it healthy in multiple ways. Their task is to control the population of unfriendly microbes such as yeast and “bad” bacteria. The positive bacteria are the main hard-working engineers of the ecology of your vagina. If something causes a shift away from the ideal, they work to secure your ecology system goes back into line.

Antibiotic effects

One of the most common causes of die-off of your normal flora is antibiotics. With some antibiotics, you are at risk of yeast overgrowth, which can lead to vaginal candida (often called a yeast infection). This is one of the many reasons to be careful about the use of antibiotics and use them only if you really need them.

Normal vaginal discharges also contain a very small quantity of natural sugars. The usual minimum level of sugar helps prevent overgrowth of yeast. The sugar level in the vaginal fluid increases in diabetes and pregnancy.

Keeping it cool

Although the vagina is usually quite warm, or slightly above the normal body temperature, it's best not to increase the heat! Anything that creates and holds in heat can lead to an overgrowth of yeast and lead to vaginal infections. A wet bathing suit on a hot day, tights, lycra or spandex workout clothes, synthetic panties or leggings, plastic-backed panty-liners, tight jeans – these all create heat. Try to wear cotton panties, natural fibre leggings or tights, cotton pads during your menstrual cycle and nothing in the night.

Contraceptive concerns

Certain forms of contraception may affect the normal system, directly or indirectly. Any product that contains Nonoxynol 9, the chemical used in most spermicides can be problematic. Many women are highly sensitive to these chemicals and inflammation can occur when using spermicides. These include condoms with spermicide and all other types of spermicidal creams and suppositories. It is best to avoid irritating sperm-killing chemicals.

Hormonal birth control including birth control pills, Depo shot, implants, progesterone containing IUDs, the “Patch”, the “Ring” – may mean that there are slightly higher amounts of natural sugar in your vaginal discharge and hormonal shifts which may cause differing results of vaginal discharges.

Feminine Products

Exposure to synthetic chemicals and cleaning products can also shift the balance and lead to a reduction of the “good” bacteria. Vaginal infections are often linked with the use of douches, vaginal deodorants, sprays, wipes, washing powder, antibacterial soaps, body wash, bubble baths and other feminine hygiene products.

Keeping it clean

Your healthy vagina will not smell bad and needs no artificial hygiene products to irritate and kill your normal flora. Clean your vagina with clear, clean water. That is all you need. A hand-held shower is ideal for the cleaning but it is never ever a good idea to clean inside the vaginal canal at all. A mild soap can be used on the outer areas such as the outer edge of the outer lips but should be avoided on the internal lips and around the vaginal opening.

By knowing what is normal for you, you can seek advice if you notice any changes but remember some sexually transmissible infections may not have any signs. If you have an increased or profuse discharge, if there are wrong smells, bad taste or strange looks, it may be a sign of imbalance of infection.

Be vigilant for any changes, including a cheerful colour, or when it is thicker or thinner than normal or clumpy. The vaginal juices should never be burning, itching or irritating. If you check your vaginal fluids regularly, you will recognise any changes early.

Now that you understand the basics of your vaginal ecology, you have the resources to make good decisions to protect and care for your delicate environment. You can keep your system healthy and prevent the things that could disturb your natural defences. If signs of imbalance occur you will be able to take actions to correct the system for yourself or to get help from your health care provider before things get worse.

Essentially your genitals are a self-regulating ecosystem and the less you disturb the natural balance, the better off you will be. Do not mess with a good thing.

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