

## Five things you didn't know about vaginas and vulvas

There's a lot we don't know about vulvas and vaginas – in fact many women don't know the difference between the two. But these 'female bits' are fascinating body parts and can play big roles in not only your sexual health, but your general health too.

So, let's take a tour of some lesser-known facts, and fill in any knowledge gaps.

### 1. Your vagina is more acidic than the rest of your body

Even though it doesn't *sound* particularly healthy, having an acidic vaginal environment is very important in keeping this part of your body in good health.

An acidic environment protects the vagina from infection and helps to keep the growth of bad bacteria and yeast in check.

If the vagina becomes too alkaline (the opposite of acidic), then unhealthy levels of these microscopic organisms can grow, increasing the risk of bacterial infections such as bacterial vaginosis (BV). The vagina becomes more alkaline naturally after menopause, therefore making it more prone to bacterial infections.

**The lesson:** Avoid practices that can affect the vaginal flora, such as douching, or using soaps or perfumed products.

The vulva (the external part) only requires gentle daily washing with warm water, while the vagina (the internal tube) is a self-cleaning organ – so, in terms of cleaning and 'maintenance', just leave the vagina to do its thing.

Read more about vulval care, including how to manage vulval irritation by downloading [this helpful Jean Hailes booklet](#) for free.

### 2. There is much more to the clitoris than meets the eye

The clitoris is thought to be unlike any other organ, in that its only purpose is sexual pleasure. It has a rich supply of blood vessels and nerve endings, with some researchers stating it has twice as many nerve endings as a penis.

But even though we think of the clitoris as being small, there is much more to this body part that meets the eye.

The anatomy of the clitoris is much like an iceberg; we can only see the tip and there is much, much more of this body part hidden beneath the surface.

While the visible tip is indeed typically quite small, beneath the vulval skin, two arms of the clitoris extend outwards. These arms (known as crura) are surprisingly long, measuring between 5-9cm in length.

There are also two internal bulbs which make up the rest of the clitoris, hidden beneath the skin. These bulbs extend downwards from the tip and measure between 3-7cm long.

**The lessons:** Don't underestimate it; there's a lot more to female anatomy than meets the eye. Get to know your own. Use a mirror so you can look and become familiar with your own vulva and what is normal for you. This makes it easier to detect any abnormal changes such as differences in colour or texture.

Remember that every vulva is unique and usually not symmetrical. Rarely does a vulva look like the edited images that often appear online. Check out [The Labia Library](#) for realistic images showing just how varied vulvas can be.

### 3. Vaginas come in all shapes and sizes

Just as each vulva is unique, so too is every vagina. In fact, scientific studies have revealed that vaginas can vary significantly in their length and general shape. (Remember, the vagina is the internal muscular tube that starts at the vulva – the external part – and goes up to the cervix, where the uterus or womb begins)

One study from 2006 revealed that vaginal lengths can range from 4-9.5cm, while an earlier study recorded lengths of up to 15cm.

Vaginal shape is another feature that has great variety. Using internal casts of women's vaginas, researchers in 2003 categorised the vaginal tube into five different shapes. The different categories were cone-shaped, parallel sides, heart-shaped, slug-shaped, and pumpkin seed-shaped.

However more recent research from a larger study found that "the shape of the tube is not symmetrical or similar to any known geometric shape".

**The lesson:** Don't think or worry about how your vagina *looks*; just think about how it *feels*.

When it comes to sex, many women worry that their vagina isn't normal. What the research shows is that there is no such thing as a normal-looking vagina – each and every one can be as different as the person who owns it.

What *is* important to pay attention to when it comes to sex and your vagina, is if you experience pain or discomfort. Painful sex is a common experience with many different causes and management options. [Read more about painful sex](#), and know that you don't have to put up with it. Help and support are available. Seek advice from your doctor.

#### 4. Your pelvic floor muscles can impact your sex life

The lower vagina is guarded by the pelvic floor muscles. That's why the health and strength of these muscles can impact your sex life.

A small number of studies show that regular pelvic floor muscle training increases blood flow and contributes to greater pleasure from penetrative sex and more intense orgasms.

Exercising these muscles can increase blood supply and nerve activity in the vulva and vagina which, in theory, can all lead to greater pleasure.

Of course, a more satisfying sex life is just one potential positive outcome from creating a good pelvic floor exercise routine. Others include better bladder and bowel health and a decreased risk of pelvic organ prolapse (in which organs such as your bladder can drop down and sit lower than usual).

On the other hand, women who have overactive pelvic floor muscles (meaning the muscles are unable to release or are in the squeeze position to begin with) may experience painful sex or other symptoms such as pain when inserting a tampon or using the toilet.

In such cases, pelvic floor physiotherapy can be used to downtrain these muscles and enable women to release them.

**The lesson:** Pelvic floor exercises are important for every woman, every day. Learn how to do it the right way and ensure you can release your pelvic floor just as easily as you can squeeze it. [Listen to a podcast](#) from Jean Hailes pelvic floor physiotherapist, Janetta Webb.

#### 5. Your vulva and vagina will change throughout your life

Just like your other body parts and tissues, the vagina and vulva can be affected by changes that come with age and different life stages.

Some common changes include thinning of the vulval skin due to the hormonal changes of menopause, or a darkening of the vulval skin during pregnancy because of the increased blood flow to the area.

But if you are concerned about the health of your vagina or vulva for any reason, if something doesn't seem right or normal for you, don't suffer in silence or go it alone. Speak to your trusted doctor – not Dr Google!

Your GP's office is your safe space for discussing your whole health, including these important and amazing body parts. And now that you know a little more about the vagina and vulva, hopefully you'll be inspired to take good care of them.

Read more about [vulval and vaginal health](#) on the Jean Hailes website.



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