

Experts say that getting better acquainted with your **privates** will improve your health and boost your **sex** life. So don't be shy. Enjoy some bonding moments with your most mysterious **body parts.**

A.k.a. your vagina

Orgasm!
Orgasm!
Orgasm!

Let's take a look, shall we?



BY THERESA O'ROURKE / PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN FORBES

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 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.

“Does this outfit make my vagina look fat?”

A POPULAR PET NAME FOR THE VAGINA IS “PURSE.” And some women seem to have set their sights on the designer variety. Blame porn, where vulvas are perfectly symmetrical, for the rise of the designer vagina.

The problem is that most women aren’t naturally symmetrical. And that’s where two surgeries come in: **Vaginoplasty** tightens the muscles in the vaginal canal so that the woman feels tighter during

sex; **labiaplasty** shortens and reshapes the labia so that the inner lips are tucked into the outer lips. (Many natural vulvas have the inner labia peeking out from the outer labia like a tongue.)

Both surgeries are outpatient procedures that typically take two hours, says Debra Hoppe, M.D., and both can be done for medical reasons, adds Lissa Rankin, M.D., author of *What’s Up Down There?* Some

women who’ve had many babies may experience pelvic prolapse, in which “the uterus, bladder, and rectum sag into the vagina,” says Rankin. Vaginoplasty tightens and lifts everything. And labiaplasty is beneficial to women with extra-long labia that can chafe and scab as they rub against underwear.

Unfortunately, most of the women who have labiaplasty do so for

cosmetic reasons, says Rankin. And according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), both of these surgeries can have complications, including infection, scar tissue, and altered sensation. ACOG says many surgeries would be avoided if women simply knew how normal vaginas look and feel. Hoppe says women should talk with their doctors before considering either procedure.

“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 Debra 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

Some hot spots are hidden deep inside.



PROP STYLING: SARA WACKSMAN/JED ROOT

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



Because the oyster resembles female genitalia, ancient cultures deemed it a powerful aphrodisiac.

Prune Your Way to More Pleasure

NEW RESEARCH HAS FOUND A LINK BETWEEN BELOW-THE-BELT GROOMING AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION.

"Women who remove their pubic hair tend to receive more oral sex," says Debby Herbenick, Ph.D. But booking that Brazilian wax session doesn't guarantee you a one-way ticket to Orgasm Isle. "It may be that women who crave oral sex groom themselves in anticipation of it. Many feel more comfortable receiving oral sex when there's little or no hair to get in the way," she says.

The research does not, however, suggest that women with more pubic hair experience less pleasure. "Women with less hair just feel a different kind of stimulation," explains Herbenick. "In fact, keeping some hair down there can actually make your pubic area more sensitive to the touch. Some people find that having a little bit of pubic hair to gently tug on feels very sensual and enhances the sensation."

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, knobby 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 Debra 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.

How well do you know your vagina?

> Take our quiz at WomensHealthMag.com/Vagina.