

Feminine Hygiene Products: Helpful or Harmful?

For centuries, companies that market feminine hygiene products tried to convince women that there were problems with their vaginas, when in fact, there were none.

Today, there are far more vaginal products and services pitched to women than ever before. The items and procedures are touted as improving vagina health. But are they worth the money?

"Everybody is unique. It's important to get familiar with what's normal for you," says Dr. Kristin Rojas, a breast cancer surgeon and board-certified gynecologist at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center. Your vagina is a mostly internal part of your body. Menstrual fluids pass through it. So does a baby during childbirth.

Your vulva is made up of the parts of your genitals that you can easily see with a mirror. These include:

- the labia (the folds or "lips")
- the clitoris
- the mons pubis, the mound covered by hair

The labia minor are the delicate, moist, inner lips of the vagina, the labia major are its hair-bearing outer lips.

The basic messages, behind the marketing, are lies, says Dr. Rojas.

"Companies tell women that the vagina needs to look and smell a certain way or that

their unique anatomy is not healthy."

At times, doctors and other concerned individuals, including parents, have pushed back against the marketers. One company launched a product line aimed at young girls called OMV! The firm described the product as antidotes to "period funk and bikini itch."

Doctors and parents united to debunk The OMV! marketing campaign. They created a slew of irate tweets, YouTube videos, and TikTok posts telling kids that vaginas are not meant to smell like fruit or flowers, and that they can clean themselves.

What's normal and healthy for the vagina?

The vagina is a muscular tube whose top surface consists of mucous membranes. "A healthy vagina cleans itself by means of a normal physiologic discharge. The discharge is mostly cells that its top layer has shed," says Dr. Rojas.

The odor, color, and amount of your vaginal discharge is changeable. It depends on where you are in your monthly cycle, whether you're pregnant or nursing or sexually aroused. The look and scent of every woman's vagina are unique to her. The scents vary and are often described as musky, earthy, pungent, or even slightly sour.

Your best and safest bet for keeping your vagina clean is simple and involves no soaps or special cleansers. "The vagina's mucous membranes are very sensitive to chemicals and synthetic fragrances. The best way to clean the vagina is with plain water," says Dr. Rojas.

Despite this, she adds, "There are entire aisles in drug stores and grocery stores stocked with vaginal products." They include anti-itch creams, feminine wipes, powders, sprays, suppositories, vaginal moisturizers, anti-itch creams, and washes, plus special razors and products to remove pubic hair.

pH and the microbiome matter

"One reason a lot of these products are so harmful is that they disrupt the natural pH of the vagina," says Dr. Rojas. She explains that the vagina is meant to be slightly acidic.

"We hear a lot these days about the gut microbiome," says Dr. Rojas. "Well, the vagina has its own microbiome with billions of bacteria, and it needs to be in a slightly acid state to maintain the right balance between the good and bad bacteria."

The good bacteria, called lactobacilli, are nourished by the skin cells of the vagina. They keep bad bacteria, called anaerobes, in check. "Harsh soaps and washes can throw off the vagina's pH. This, in turn, allows the overgrowth of the bad bacteria, leading to infections," she explains.

The key to good vaginal health? Balance



When the balance between the good and bad bacteria in a woman's vaginal microbiome is thrown off, it puts her at higher risk for a condition called bacterial vaginosis. This can cause pain, itching, and burning. It's the most common vaginal condition that occurs among sexually active women between the ages of 15 and 44.

Many vaginal products contain synthetic fragrances and chemicals or preservatives such as parabens, which have been shown to be harmful in some studies.

"These chemicals can be absorbed through the vagina, and they build up in your system over time. Some of them promote the growth of tumors and of cancers in mice," Dr. Rojas says.

What's not normal?

"Women know their bodies," she says. If you notice that something about your vulva (the lips of the vagina) or your vagina feels, smells, or looks strange or concerns you, contact your healthcare provider. That way, you will get a reliable diagnosis and any treatment that may be needed.

"Don't try home remedies or just pick up a product from a store's shelf," says Dr. Rojas. "Vaginal tissues are delicate, and hidden chemicals in these products may make matters worse."

Certain products may make you feel better briefly while worsening your vaginal health. Some vaginal products may seem effective. But this may be because they contain chemicals like benzocaine that numb the area, explains Dr. Rojas. "You may think you're fixing inflammation when you're not," she says.

What's worse, she says, these kinds of products can sometimes lay the groundwork for health problems.

"Women may be allergic to ingredients in the products. They can develop cases of chronic inflammation or contact dermatitis, which can cause itching and burning," says Dr. Rojas.

Contact dermatitis sometimes leads to women having super infections where certain

harmful bacteria or yeast start growing out of control, she explains. "At that point, these infections become harder to treat," she warns.

Another reason to avoid potentially irritating vaginal products is that they can increase your risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI). A woman's vaginal lining can become inflamed if products contain chemicals with long names, synthetic fragrances, and even glitter. The lining may also become inflamed for other reasons, such as having bacterial vaginosis. When that inflammation arises, research has shown that her risk of getting an HIV infection or another STI goes up.

Talk to your doctor about any concerns before buying expensive products on the internet or at the supermarket.

Your health care provider can correct any misleading marketing messages.

"For a long time, talking about vaginal health has been taboo," says Dr. Rojas. "But not receiving this information makes women more susceptible to marketing claims."

"An important part of my job is making these subjects a normal conversation to help make clear what are healthy habits and what are not."

For more on vaginal health, visit the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

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