

HOW TO DO A VULVAL SELF-EXAMINATION

- Find a private place and time when you can relax.
- Use a hand mirror so you can see what you are looking at.
- Starting at the top (known as the mons pubis — the place where public hair grows) gently touch and feel as well as look at the skin. Work your way down by checking the clitoris, the outer lips, the inner lips, and the perineum (area between the vaginal opening and the anus).
- Look out for any changes in the colour of the skin, any thickening of the skin, any new lumps or bumps (such as warts or skin tags), any ulcers or sores, any symptoms of persistent itching or soreness.

If anything is different or you are concerned, consult a health professional who you are comfortable with or see one of the doctors at SHFPACT.

DISCHARGE

Discharge is the fluid like substance that is secreted from the vagina. It is produced by the cervix, the uterus, and the vagina itself. It generally appears on underwear but may also be seen during a vulval examination. Discharge is a normal and healthy 'housekeeping' function of the vagina.

A change in your discharge can also be an indication that something is wrong so it's important to know what your normal discharge looks like (usually clear or creamy white which can look pale yellow when it dries on your undies). If there are unusual changes to the colour, smell, or amount of your vaginal discharge then a visit to a health professional is recommended.

A NOTE ABOUT THE APPEARANCE OF VULVAS

As with many parts of our bodies, vulvas look different from person to person, as well as at different stages on our lives. Vulvas are as individual as our faces! Many things can influence the way we feel about our bodies (e.g., what media we watch, what social media engage in, what we read or listen to, attitudes from our family of origin, messages from the society we live in, and our own attitudes and feelings).

It's good to take a moment to consider the reality versus the fantasy of what we see and hear. It can also help to understand more about the vulva and see the different types of real vulvas out there.

It should be noted that pornography and other sexual imagery are not good places to learn more about our bodies — the vulva included. Reputable, evidence-based sites like the Labia Library: labialibrary.org.au aim to help women understand more about their vulva and become more comfortable with the way it looks. Anyone with concerns with the way their vulva looks should talk with a health professional or make an appointment at the SHFPACT clinic to talk with a doctor or nurse.

References : Melbourne sexual health Centre: Genital Skin Care
Dept of Obstetrics and gynaecology Uni of Washington: Guidelines for vulvar skin care
UK Vulval Pain Society: How to perform a vulval self-examination
ANZ Vulvovaginal Society: <http://anzvs.org/patient-information/vulval-skin-care/>



OPENING HOURS

Please contact our reception staff on 02 6247 3077 or visit shfpact.org.au for SHFPACT clinic hours

LOCATION

SHFPACT is conveniently located in the city.

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CONTACT

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SHFPACT CLINICAL SERVICES

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- PrEP information, advice, and prescription

SHFPACT is a health promotion charity (HPC) assisted with funding from the ACT Government.

I'M ALL ABOUT

VULVAL CARE



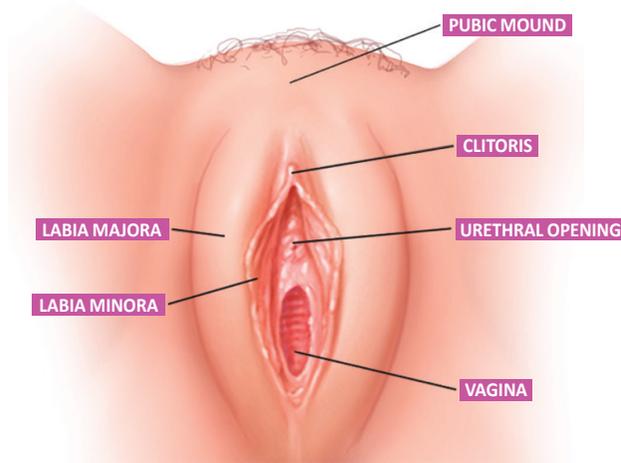
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Call 02 6247 3077 • SMS 0400 770 999
or email shfpact@shfpact.org.au

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WHAT IS THE VULVA

The vulva is the term used to describe the external female genitals, and includes the inner and outer labia (lips), the opening to the vagina, the opening of tube leading to the bladder (the urethra), and the clitoris.



THE SKIN OF THE VULVA

Taking care of the skin of your vulva is an important part of your health care. There are a few key factors to consider with vulva skin care:

- 1) Correct washing and care.
- 2) Avoiding irritants.
- 3) Reducing excess moisture.
- 4) Avoiding scratching and/or rubbing.

WASHING THE VULVA

- The skin of the vulva is sensitive and only requires gentle washing with warm water.
- Avoid the use of any soaps, body wash, wipe, sprays etc. even hypoallergenic, sensitive, and so-called 'natural' products can cause irritation.
- If your skin is particularly dry you can try using an unscented unperfumed wash such as aqueous cream, QV[®] or Dermeze[®].
- Washing once a day is plenty. More frequent washing may cause dryness and irritation.
- If you enjoy baths, avoid having your bath too hot and avoid bubble baths, perfumed oils, medicated oils, or antiseptics. If you do use these make sure you rinse the vulva with warm water afterwards.
- Gently pat your vulva dry, don't rub the skin. If your skin is irritated, you may like to try using a hairdryer on 'cool' setting to dry the vulva instead of a towel.

VULVAL SKIN IRRITANTS

Some of the most common substances that can irritate the vulva include the following:

- Soaps or anything that will lather and remove healthy oils from the skin.
- Tea tree oil and scented oils.
- Medicated creams, antiseptics, and peroxide.
- Bubble bath, bath salts, and other perfumed products.
- 'Feminine hygiene' products such as washes, sprays, and wipes.
- Some brands of toilet paper, particularly highly scented or coloured ones.
- Some pads and panty liners (especially if scented).
- Some laundry detergents.
- Deodorants.
- Douches.
- Waxing, shaving, or depilatory creams.
- Tight synthetic clothing and dyes in some underwear.

TO PREVENT VULVAL SKIN IRRITATION

- Wash the vulva as outlined above.
- Avoid 'feminine hygiene' products e.g., sprays, wipes, powders etc.
- Try unscented, undyed, unbleached toilet paper.
- Try a different type of laundry detergent, preferably hypoallergenic.
- Consider giving underwear an extra rinse after washing to remove laundry detergent residue.
- Use tampons or a menstrual cup rather than pads if pads are irritant.
- Avoid using panty liners. If discharge is heavy, try changing your underpants during the day or using 'period undies' instead. If you need panty liners try to use unscented and unbleached products.
- Wear loose clothing including 100% cotton underwear.
- Avoid wearing any underwear at night.
- Avoid removing pubic hair, particularly shaving, as it can cause significant irritation to the skin.

If vulval skin irritation occurs and persists despite trying the preventative suggestions, see a medical professional. Avoid trying to self-treat with over-the-counter products and creams. Only use products prescribed or advised by a health professional.

EXCESS MOISTURE

Excess moisture can worsen the effects of irritation, to reduce this:

- Take off wet swim wear as soon as possible (especially if swimming in a chlorinated pool).
- Wear underwear that will absorb moisture – some synthetic underwear will hold moisture at the surface whereas cotton will absorb it.
- Carry clean underwear to change into if needed.



SCRATCHING AND/OR RUBBING

Skin damaged or irritated by friction and rubbing is more easily infected. Scratching can also create what is known as an 'itch-scratch cycle' where skin and nerve fibres thicken, which in turn increases itching.

To avoid damage and irritation from scratching and rubbing:

- Avoid rubbing the vulva with a washcloth, just gently wash with your hands or a handheld shower.
- Gently pat dry with a towel or use a hairdryer on cool.
- Avoid hair removal in the area.
- Avoid tight clothing.
- Use plenty of water based non- perfumed, hypoallergenic lubricant during sexual activity.

IF SKIN IS ITCHY

- Keep nails short if scratching is happening at night when asleep.
- Wear loose cotton underwear and avoid underwear at night.
- Avoid overheating the skin – avoid electric blankets, showers/ baths that are too hot, or synthetic clothing pressed up against skin.
- Keep skin cool – use a covered ice pack or a damp cloth to soothe, if using any creams on your vulva store them in the fridge.
- Try distraction, mindfulness, or relaxation techniques when the urge to scratch strikes.
- Consult with a health professional if this is the first occurrence or if an existing condition is persistent.

VULVAL SELF-EXAMINATION

One way to pick up on changes in the vulva before they become an issue is to perform vulval self-examinations. The sooner you detect any changes the less likely symptoms will persist and potentially the need for extended treatment may be reduced. It's also just great to get to know your own body. You can do this on a regular basis, once a month, or whenever you think of it.