

The Wonder Down Under. Hint, It's Not Australia!



So, what's a vulva? The vulva is the whole female genital "package" — labia, clitoris, and vagina. This part of our anatomy gets called lots of funny names — coochie, woo-woo, "down there," and it's sometimes confused with the vagina — the stretchable passage that connects a woman's outer sex organs with the cervix and uterus.

Because women's genitals, unlike men's, are hidden, they can seem mysterious, confusing, and even shameful in a way that's usually not the case with the handy-dandy penis. Let's eliminate the mystery — every woman has a vulva. It's the source of most of pleasure in sex for women, so it's a good idea to get to know it well and to learn to enjoy its many wonders.

Don't be shy! Some women get to know their bodies by taking a good look at their vulvas. This can be done by standing or sitting over a mirror and looking at the vulva. (I'm serious!) Examining the vulva allows a woman to recognize these common parts and also notice how the vulva is unique.

The parts:

- Outer labia (lips)
- Inner labia (lips)
- Clitoris
- Clitoral hood
- Urethra
- Vagina

Labia: The word labia means "lips" in Latin. The outer labia are two folds of skin and fatty tissue that are covered with pubic hair after puberty and more or less hide the rest of the vulva. They can be large or small, short or long, and even (like breasts) two different sizes. This is all normal and part of what makes us each unique. They can be sexually sensitive and can swell a little when a woman gets turned on.

The inner labia are also sensitive and can swell up when you're aroused. These are the folds of skin that go from the clitoral hood to below the vagina. Some people think they look like wings. The inner labia can vary in color from pink to brownish black depending on the color of a woman's skin. Like nipples, the inner labia can change color as women mature. Sometimes they stick out from between the outer labia, and they can be wrinkled or smooth.

Clitoris: The clitoris is located beneath the point where the inner labia meet. The head, or glans, of the clitoris may appear to be smaller than a pea or bigger than a fingertip. But only the tip of the clitoris can be seen at the top of the vulva in the soft folds where the labia meet, under the skin of the clitoral hood. The rest of the spongy shaft of the clitoris reaches inside the body up to more than five inches! It can come in different sizes, and it can have different levels of sensitivity. Like the penis, the clitoris becomes stiff and swollen during arousal. Unlike the penis, the clitoris is designed only for pleasure.

The clitoris is the pleasure center of the vulva. It's a pretty cool organ. It doesn't have a central role in intercourse and reproduction like the penis and the vagina do. The clitoris is basically there just to make women feel good! And it is SUPER sensitive: the clitoris has thousands of nerve endings in it! This can be good news and bad news. While the clitoris is made for intense pleasure, for a lot of women, it can be too sensitive to touch directly. To get the maximum mileage out of this organ, women need to tell their partners how they like to be touched.

Masturbation: Touching or stroking one's own genitals to feel good — with or without orgasm — is called masturbation. Everyone seems to know that guys masturbate, but girls do it, too! A girl usually masturbates by rubbing her clitoris with her fingers, but there are a lot of ways to masturbate. Many women enjoy inserting their fingers or other objects into their vaginas during masturbation. Masturbation is perfectly normal. It's also normal not to masturbate. It's a freebie — it has no risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections.

The vagina, the hymen, and virginity: The vagina is the passage that connects a woman's outer sex organs — the vulva — with the cervix and uterus. It's often called the birth canal because it's the way the fetus is pushed out of the body during childbirth. This is where menstrual fluid leaves the body and the penis goes during vaginal intercourse.

The vagina often has skin at the opening that is called a hymen. Some girls have hymens that totally cover their vagina, and some girls have so little hymenal tissue they may seem to have no hymen at all. The hymen can stretch open at first sexual intercourse, through masturbation, or while participating in sports. A lot of people think that if the hymen is not intact, you aren't a virgin and that if the hymen is intact, you are a virgin. But most people in the U.S. agree that a virgin doesn't depend on the hymen — it depends on whether or not people have had sex before.

Discharge and smells: This is probably the biggest source of concern about the vulva. Like most of the human body, the vulva can be a little bit messy. During puberty, the vagina starts to produce a discharge that can be white, or clear. It is called leukorrhea. This is the self-cleaning feature of your vagina. Discharge carries germs and other unwanted stuff out of the body. And when we're ovulating or turned on, our vaginas produce a different discharge that is slippery and clear. It's also a natural lubricant.

The vulva has a characteristic scent, but if it's healthy the smell is not unpleasant. Some people really like the smell of vulvas. If your vulva smells really bad, fishy, or yeasty, or has any other strong, unpleasant odor, see a health care provider. An unpleasantly smelly discharge can be a sign of a vaginal or other infection that should be treated right away.

Health and hygiene: In an effort to eliminate all natural smells and discharges, a lot of women and girls use douches and feminine deodorants. Remember that the vagina is self-cleaning, so douching is unnecessary. Regular douching can disturb the balance of the normal amount of bacteria found in the vagina, which is one way a woman can get vaginitis, an inflammation of the vagina.

So that's the low-down on your Wonder Down Under!