



GOOD GYNO

## “Down there” secrets you must know

The truth about Brazilians, bubble baths, and more.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN

- Va-jay-jay, bajingo, cha-cha, down there. Given our reluctance to even say the word “vagina,” it’s no wonder that myths about this body part often go unchecked. You’ve heard that douching is bad and cotton panties are good—those are true. But what about all those other health “factoids” concerning odor, medications, and peeing? Here, the real story.

### MYTH

#### Your vagina should smell like orchids

**Debunked:** It’s normal to smell a little sweaty or have a mild sour-milk scent from lactobacilli (a kind of healthy bacteria in the vagina that encourage a weakly acidic yet protective pH level). “We’re taught that we’re supposed to be odorless or smell like flowers, but we don’t smell like flowers—and we don’t smell bad,” says Elizabeth Stewart, MD, director of the Vulvovaginal Service at Harvard Vanguard Medical Association and author of *The V Book*. New odor-reducing, fresh-and-clean products hit the market every year, all with subtle sexual appeal. Don’t fall for it.

You don’t even need soap to keep your vagina clean and happy. Warm water is totally adequate for good hygiene (although a gentle product could be used).

### MYTH

#### If a trimmed bikini line is good, totally bare is even better

**Debunked:** Pubic hair cushions and protects your vagina from friction and infection. Removing all your hair or leaving just a landing strip can lead to significant irritation—from the removal process itself and from rubbing against underwear or jeans. That friction can cause invisible micro-abrasions that give bacteria on the skin an opportunity to sneak into the bloodstream. “People think less hair is good,” says Melissa Goist, MD, an OB-GYN at The Ohio State University Medical Center, “but that’s only if you have lice or crabs.” Going bare might also increase transmission of skin-to-skin sexually transmitted infections like herpes or human papillomavirus (HPV). Still want to dare to

be bare? Dr. Goist suggests shaving with a new razor every time and using warm water and shaving cream to limit the risk of infection.

**MYTH**  
**Anti-fungal and anti-itch meds treat the same problem**

**Debunked:** Anti-itch creams may temporarily relieve itching, but they can't get rid of yeast, says Adelaide Nardone, MD, a gynecologist in New York City and clinical instructor of OB-GYN at Brown University. "To cure a yeast infection you need an anti-fungal like Monistat or Gyne-Lotrimin, or the prescription Diflucan," she says. "That's not to say you can't use an anti-itch cream, but use it in conjunction with an anti-fungal medicine." You're not sure if it's really a yeast infection? There's no harm in trying a nonprescription yeast med, but Dr. Nardone recommends seeing your doctor to rule out infections such as bacterial vaginosis.

**MYTH**  
**If my vagina doesn't look like a Playboy model's, I need surgery**

**Debunked:** Dr. Stewart has seen thousands of vaginas and insists that there is no "normal" when it comes to vaginal beauty. "Some women have big, fat labia, some have little thin labia. What you see in *Playboy* is not the be-all and end-all." There may be a legitimate need for labioplasty: Your lips may stick out prominently, causing abrasions or discomfort during sex or physical activity. If this is the case, seek medical advice from a board-certified gynecologist or plastic surgeon with labioplasty experience. But the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology says there's no data supporting the aesthetic procedures' ability



## Vagina Tales

to enhance sexual function or self-esteem. There are, however, risks of infection, altered sensation, pain, and scarring.

**MYTH**  
**It's best to wear panties to bed**

**Debunked:** Sleeping with underwear on increases moisture in the genital region, practically welcoming yeast to multiply. "Air is good, moisture is bad," says Laurie Swaim, MD, a board-certified OB-GYN practicing at The Woman's Hospital of Texas. And some women who sweat a lot at night while wearing underpants may develop a vulvar skin condition similar to jock itch. Try going commando or wearing loose

pajama bottoms. Avoid thongs, too. If you must don panties, make sure they're loose fitting and have a breathable cotton crotch. (What should you wear during the day to fight moisture? See "V-Friendly Undies," below.)

**MYTH**  
**Bubble baths are sooo relaxing and totally harmless**

**Debunked:** Enveloping yourself in sugared-pear-mist bubble bath could bring on problems like bacterial vaginosis (BV). Soaps, bubble bath, even sperm (which has a higher pH than bubble bath) are all alkaline, unlike your slightly acidic vagina. They alter the pH and create the perfect environment for BV to develop, says Deborah Larkey, MD, an OB-GYN at Columbia St. Mary's hospital system in Milwaukee. Stick with bath salts or oils, which are non-alkaline and won't disrupt the pH. If you notice a strong fishy odor or creamy gray discharge, get tested for BV. It's actually the most common

*(Continues on page 91)*

## V-friendly undies

Don't suffer—try one of these moisture-fighting products instead.



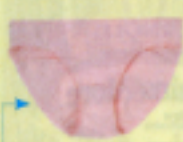
**For playing hard:** The Athleta Seamless Tattoo Brief (\$16; [www.athleta.com](http://www.athleta.com)) features a full-coverage rear.



**For working out:** The Lucy Speedy Racer Short (\$38; [www.lucy.com](http://www.lucy.com)) has an odor-fighting liner/crotch.



**For special moments:** OnGossamer's Luxury Liner Thong (\$19; [www.ongossamer.com](http://www.ongossamer.com)) has a black wicking crotch.



**For every day:** Jockey's Ultimates Bamboo Cool and Natural Panties (\$9.50; [www.jockey.com](http://www.jockey.com)) have absorbent bamboo fiber.

lower-genital-tract syndrome among women of reproductive age and has been implicated in preterm delivery.

**MYTH**

**Eating sweets causes yeast infections**

**Debunked:** Our vaginas are not bread machines. Yes, yeast feeds on added sugar in baking, but sugar in your diet from cookies or dairy products won't hurt your vagina. "Yeast infections have nothing to do with sugar intake," says Liz Applegate, PhD, director of sports nutrition at the University of California, Davis. At the same time, eating healthier may lower your risk of developing the itchy condition. Shoot for a high-fiber diet with at least three servings of whole grains, three servings of fruit, and five servings of veggies a day.

**MYTH**

**Only older women have to worry about leaking pee**

**Debunked:** Many younger women suffer from incontinence, too. In fact, urologist Michael Safir, MD, co-author of *Overcoming Urinary Incontinence: A Woman's Guide to Treatment*, says that in his office the average age of women who report stress incontinence (leaking when you laugh or exercise) is 45, with some in their 20s and 30s. Women in their childbearing years may experience leakage, particularly after multiple vaginal deliveries, which weaken critical areas of support. Other risk factors: prior pelvic surgery, obesity, and a family history of stress incontinence. Regardless of your age, "you shouldn't accept leakage," Dr. Safir says. "No guy would put up with that." Ask your gyno for tips on pelvic-floor exercises (Kegels). If those don't help, it may be time to find a urologist; she can perform a simple, 30-minute outpatient procedure that dramatically reduces leakage, Dr. Safir says. (For more info on treating the problem, check out [Health.com/pelvic-disorder](http://Health.com/pelvic-disorder).)

# You need to know

The good, the bad, and the ridiculous

## Cheers & Jeers

### Antismoking laws slash secondhand smoke

The number of states with antismoking laws has tripled from 8 to 25 since 2004. It's too early yet to judge the results, though we're likely to see a growing decline in the risk of serious illness due to secondhand smoke, according to the U.S.



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But almost half of nonsmokers are still exposed to secondhand smoke, increasing their risk of lung cancer by 20 percent.

### Finding friendship in sickness

When you're really ill, it can be tough to connect with others who truly know how you feel. That's where Friends Health Connection (FHC) can lend a hand: This nonprofit helps individuals with similar health challenges connect and support each other via an online community. Patients can correspond, view guest lectures, and learn more about coping with their conditions. Visit [www.friendshealthconnection.org](http://www.friendshealthconnection.org) if you or a loved one might benefit.

### Nutrition facts get much-needed makeover

Confused by the nutrition facts on food labels? The Nutrient Rich Foods Coalition feels your pain. The group, which brings together scientists and food industry representatives, is devising a new, simple educational system that emphasizes total nutrients instead of just fat and calorie content. The result? Smart food choices made easier. Follow the progress at [www.nutrientrichfoods.org](http://www.nutrientrichfoods.org).

### An F in bedside manner

Ever feel like your doctor doesn't seem to care about how scared, nervous, or confused you are? It isn't just you, according to a troubling new study in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*. University of Rochester researchers reviewed transcripts of conversations between lung cancer patients and their doctors, and found that when given the chance doctors showed empathy only 10 percent of the time. And in half of those cases, the doc showed some sensitivity only after being baited repeatedly by the patient with concerns about death or confusion about cancer treatment. Sounds like too many MDs slept through their bedside manner training in medical school.

### Fire retardants in toys threaten kids

Compared with children in Europe, American kids have drastically higher levels of potentially toxic fire-retardant chemicals in their bodies, according to a study from the Environmental Working Group. The chemicals, believed to disrupt hormones and potentially contribute to behavior changes, such as hyperactivity, are used in toys and a wealth of other household products. The good news: Long-overdue regulations are on the rise in the States.

