

# Keeping it clean

The truth about feminine-hygiene products

The feminine-care aisle at your local drugstore is stocked with dozens of products that promise to address embarrassing odor and make your privates smell like a “Fresh Mountain Breeze” or an “Island Escape.” Browsing there can give you a lifetime of anxieties about that not-so-fresh feeling.

But doctors say that you don’t need sprays, douches, and towelettes to keep clean and that certain products can even put you at risk for serious health problems. “That whole industry is really built around imposing standards of cosmetic beauty onto a part of the body that can take care of itself most of the time,” says Jeanne Marrazzo, M.D., associate professor of

medicine at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Here’s the lowdown on douches and other vaginal-hygiene products, and our advice. To assess these products, we consulted a panel of experts, which included Marrazzo; Courtney Schreiber, M.D., assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Pennsylvania; Sherry Marts, Ph.D., vice president of scientific affairs at the Society for Women’s Health Research, an advocacy, educational, and research group in Washington; Paul Nyirjesy, M.D., director of the Drexel Vaginitis Center in Philadelphia; and Jennifer Wider, M.D., medical adviser for the Society for Women’s Health Research.

## Guide to vaginal hygiene

What the products claim, and what gynos have to say



### douches

**WHAT THEY CLAIM TO DO** Clean the inside of the vagina. “Medicated” ones also claim to relieve itching.

**THE TRUTH** Douching is linked to increased risk of irritation; vaginal infections, such as bacterial vaginosis and chlamydia; and pelvic inflammatory disease. It can help spread existing infections to the uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries. So just skip it unless your doctor tells you otherwise. But if you must, opt for water alone, and skip the artificial fragrances.

### washes

**WHAT THEY CLAIM TO DO** Cleanse and wash away odor. When you bathe, you pour a small amount on your hand or washcloth, lather onto wet skin, and rinse clean. With some formulas, no rinsing is required; you just apply it with toilet tissue to cleanse.

**THE TRUTH** Unless you’re sensitive to fragrance, washes are probably harmless. But they don’t seem to be any better than soaps and body washes, although some washes advertise a mild non-soap formula.

## SO WHAT'S NORMAL DOWN THERE?

What changes you should—and shouldn't—worry about

### IT'S NORMAL AND HEALTHY

to have varying amounts of clear or white discharge throughout your menstrual cycle. It's all a part of your vagina's self-cleaning mechanism. It's also normal to sweat in your groin area, especially during the summer. So don't mistake summertime dampness for an infection, as many women do. In general, an unpleasant or fishy smell isn't normal and can be a sign of infection, particularly bacterial vaginosis or trichomoniasis ("trich"). So if you smell something that just isn't right, don't douse yourself with feminine-deodorant spray—talk to your doctor!

### IN ADDITION TO FUNKY ODORS, HERE ARE THREE OTHER REASONS TO SEE YOUR GYNECOLOGIST PRONTO:

■ **Major and persistent changes in the color** (especially to green or yellow), consistency, or amount of vaginal discharge.

■ **Itching, burning, redness and swelling, or pelvic pain.** These can be signs that you have an infection that may need to be treated with a prescription antibiotic.

■ **Cheesy discharge.** This could signal a yeast infection. A 2002 study published in the journal *Obstetrics & Gynecology* found

that many women who bought over-the-counter yeast-infection remedies had more than one infection at once, another type of infection, or no infection at all. So don't automatically reach for those cures you see advertised on television. The biggest danger of any self-diagnosis is that you may have a different and perhaps more serious condition. Delaying treatment of, for example, gonorrhea or chlamydia can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, which can lead to infertility, ectopic pregnancy, or chronic pelvic pain. Unless you recognize your symptoms from a previous yeast infection diagnosed by a health professional, don't treat yourself.



### scented panty liners

**WHAT THEY CLAIM TO DO** Provide protection for light-flow days during your period, as a backup for your tampon, or for daily vaginal discharge. These thin pads may have an added chemical deodorant, or fragrance.

**THE TRUTH** If you're sensitive to the chemical deodorants and fragrances, you can end up developing vaginal irritation. So stick with plain, unscented panty liners, such as Kotex Lightdays Unscented or Natracare Natural Panty Liners.

### wipes and cleansing cloths

**WHAT THEY CLAIM TO DO** These often-scented, pre-moistened, flushable cloths used after or in place of toilet paper help you feel fresh, especially during your period or before or after sex.

**THE TRUTH** Wipes can be irritating, especially if you use them too often or if you scrub too hard. If they don't irritate you, they're fine for occasional use between showers while traveling or camping, but be sure to use the unscented variety. ▶



**Guide to vaginal hygiene** continued

**sprays and powders**

**WHAT THEY CLAIM TO DO** Sprays contain ingredients like baking soda and cornstarch to absorb moisture and neutralize odor. You can use them on your external vaginal area, panties, panty liners, pads, or pantyhose. Powders are supposed to absorb moisture, block odor, and prevent chafing. Like sprays, they have ingredients like cornstarch and can be used on your external genitals and other areas.

**THE TRUTH** Like the other products, sprays and powders may irritate the skin of the vulva, causing itching and even a rash. Cornstarch can also encourage yeast infections. Stick with unscented products, and use them externally—not on the inside of the vagina—and never use them when you even suspect you have an infection.

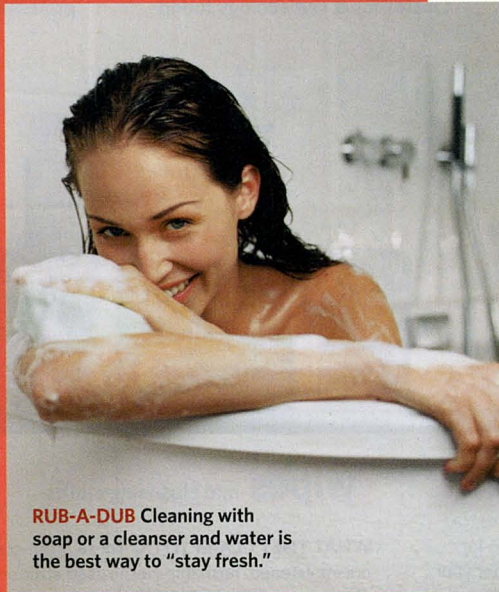


**An owner's manual**

■ **KEEP IT SIMPLE** Doctors say the best way to keep clean down below is to use plain soap or cleanser and warm water every day when you bathe or shower—just don't scrub too much—and pat dry with a towel. The vagina doesn't need to be cleaned internally.

■ **TRY A MILD CLEANSER** Whatever bar or cleanser you use on the rest of your body is usually fine for the vaginal area. Just be sure to rinse thoroughly. If you have any irritation, use mild cleansers such as Aveeno, Basis, or Cetaphil.

■ **WIPE RIGHT** When you use the bathroom, always wipe from front to back to avoid spreading bacteria from your anal area to your vagina and urethra.



**RUB-A-DUB** Cleaning with soap or a cleanser and water is the best way to "stay fresh."

■ **LET IT BREATHE** Choose underwear and exercise clothes made from fabrics that breathe, like cotton, so moisture doesn't get trapped and accumulate, which can lead to infection.

**BOTTOM LINE**

You're better off avoiding most feminine-hygiene products because they can irritate or even aggravate or cover up the symptoms of an infection. "Even the ones that are not as harmful but merely unnecessary, like the wipes and washes, are not worth your money," says Sherry Marts, Ph.D., vice president of scientific affairs for the Society for Women's Health Research in Washington. So unless you suspect an infection, let your plumbing take care of itself! But if you just can't do without these products, keep in mind that those used internally, such as douches, pose the biggest health risks.

BATH: FOLIO-ID