

## What is the Vulva?

The vulva is part of the female genital organs which you can see. It is made up of the clitoris, the opening of the vagina and the urethra (where urine comes out) and the outer and inner labia (lips).

The skin covering the vulva is delicate and is easily irritated which can make the skin sore or itchy.

These things can irritate the vulva:

- Soaps, shampoos, bubble baths, wet-wipes, and feminine hygiene products.
- Urine, sweat, blood and vaginal discharge in contact with the skin.
- Tight clothes like leggings and jeans rubbing on the skin.

This leaflet can show you how to soothe and protect your vulva.

## Be kind to your vulva 😊

Do not use soap, detergents, bubble baths, wet wipes, feminine sprays, talcum powder or antiseptic products on your vulva.

Remember that natural and organic products can cause problems too.

Avoid shaving pubic hair, trim if you must.

If your vulva is itchy or sore, an emollient can help. An emollient is another name for a plain unperfumed moisturiser. Apply an emollient as often as you think you need to. This might mean 4 times a day. Greasier emollients known as ointments are usually best as they are thicker and more protective. Examples include Hydromol Ointment, Cetraben Ointment, Epimax ointment, Vaseline (petroleum jelly). Some women prefer creams, lotions, or gels but these are more likely to contain preservatives which can irritate or cause allergic reactions. Use plain white, un-fragranced, toilet paper. If it stings when you pee, it can be helpful to apply emollient to your vulva before you pee.

## Washing

Wash your vulva by applying an emollient to the skin before stepping into the shower and rinse gently. This will clean the skin whilst protecting the area; be aware that it will not lather. Try to just use your hand to wash rather than a cloth or sponge. Pat the skin dry with a soft towel and then apply emollient again.

Take care as emollients can make your bath or shower slippery.

Emollients are flammable. Keep them and anything in contact with them away from naked flames.

Avoid douching as this can damage the lining of the vagina and is not necessary.

It is best not to wash your hair in the bath so that the shampoo does not run down on to your vulva.

Wear loose cotton underwear. White or light colours are better. The dyes in dark colours may cause a skin allergy.

Try to avoid wearing panty liners or sanitary pads and if you need them, try to use plain unperfumed ones or cotton reusable pads.

Wash your underwear and re-usable pads in un-perfumed non-biological washing powder and avoid fabric softeners.

Many skin conditions can affect the vulva. Sometimes skin conditions can change how the vulva looks. There may be colour change and the skin might look white or darker than before. Sometimes the skin can be shiny or rough to feel. Splits or cracks in the skin can make the vulva sore.

If you find sex painful it is worth seeing your doctor or nurse for a check-up. Lubricants (lubes) can help. There are many types including water-based gels, oil based or silicone-based ones to choose from.

If you have been prescribed other ointments including topical steroid ointments, it is best to wait 15 minutes between applying an emollient and a steroid ointment.

If you are having problem with incontinence (urine leaking) please see your healthcare professional. They will be able to help.

## **Get to know your vulva**

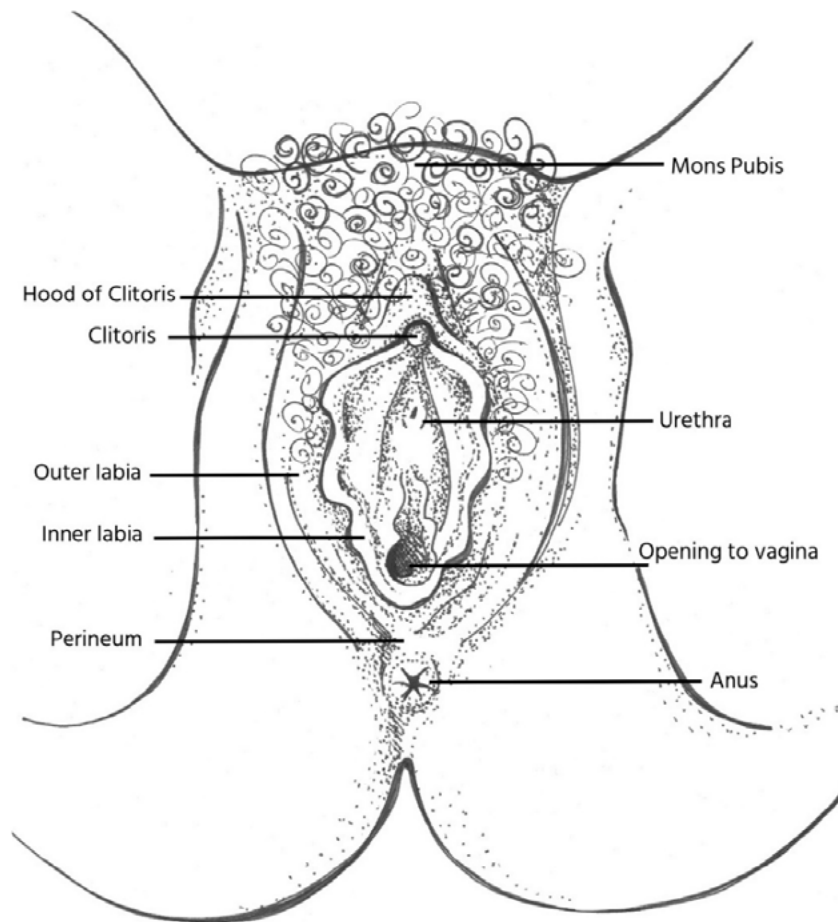
Getting to know what your vulva looks like can be helpful so that if anything changes you will notice.

For most women the best way to examine your vulva is to lie on your back on your bed with a mirror propped up against a pillow. Support your head with another pillow. Bend your knees and open your legs so that you can see all parts of the vulva.

Just as women's faces are all different from one another so too are vulvas. The labia(lips) can be long or short and it is common for one side to be longer than the other. The colour may depend on your natural skin tone, your age or the effect of hormones. It may change if you are pregnant or after the menopause.

Try to get into the habit of checking your vulva every month or two.

***The diagram below can help you to learn more about the vulva:***



Notes:

It often takes a long time for a woman's skin problem to be diagnosed and to get correct treatment. If you are worried that something is wrong, please see your GP, ANP or nurse.

Following the advice in this leaflet can make the skin more comfortable while you are waiting to see your GP or other healthcare professional

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## Other Resources

[Skinhealthinfo.org.uk](http://Skinhealthinfo.org.uk) information leaflet on lichen sclerosus & lichen planus

[Brook.org.uk](http://Brook.org.uk) good information for teenagers

[Vulvalpainsociety.org](http://Vulvalpainsociety.org)

[lichensclerosus.org](http://lichensclerosus.org)

[Gussetgrippers.co.uk](http://Gussetgrippers.co.uk) practical advice on incontinence

[labialibrary.org.au](http://labialibrary.org.au) photos of normal vulvas

## Helping with other skin conditions

If you, a family member, or friend has an undiagnosed skin condition; the website [www.pcds.org.uk](http://www.pcds.org.uk) contains useful diagnostic tools. On the homepage there are two diagnostic tools:

- Lesion Diagnostic Tool – for a skin lesion (changes to a small area of skin, lump or bump).
- General Dermatology Diagnostic Tool – for a rash or other larger area of skin change, or a problem with the hair or nails.