

Inside my vagina, should it feel smooth or bumpy? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

A woman wrote and asked you if her vagina was normal. You told her to get checked for STDs but you never answered her question. When she put her finger in her vagina, she felt bumps (she said: stalactites/stalagmites?) I, too, feel this and would like to know if this is normal. I've been to the doctor many times and have never been told that I have genital warts or herpes. Do they all have this kind of texture or am I not normal?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's common for those with vaginas to wonder if their genitals are "normal." While every body is different and there is no one "normal" vagina, it is true that the inside of the vagina does typically have a corrugated surface, as you've noticed with yours. These folds, ridges, and bumps, known as vaginal rugae, are more prominent during the reproductive years, which allows the vaginal canal to expand, making the vaginal lining less likely to tear during childbirth as well as sex. These rugae are similar to the ridges you feel when your tongue touches the roof of your mouth. Generally, the only time the vaginal canal is relatively smooth in texture is before puberty and after menopause.

In addition to checking the feel of your rugae, you can check the rest of your vaginal health. Regularly examining your vulva also can help you identify any changes that may cause concern.

While a vulva can easily be viewed with a mirror, it can be challenging to examine the vagina. As you mentioned, you can insert fingers and feel your unique texture. Women can also peek inside their vaginas with the help of a speculum ? a plastic or metal medical instrument that separates the vaginal walls. Health care providers use a speculum when they do a Pap smear. While speculums can be difficult to obtain, folks can try to order one at a local pharmacy or medical supply store. Before using a speculum:

- Become familiar with how a speculum works.
- Lubricate it with a water-based lube.
- Get in a comfortable position.
- Relax.
- Then insert the speculum and open it inside the vagina.
- Using a flashlight or other light source, you'll be able to view the vaginal walls and

cervix. They'll likely be some vaginal discharge as well. The consistency of the discharge will change throughout a monthly cycle.

- When the self-exam is through, remove the speculum ? either leave it open or close it before removal ? and clean it with soap or alcohol.

During the exam, if you suddenly notices something that does cause concern, make an appointment to visit a gynecologist, nurse practitioner, or other health care provider.

While some are unable to find a speculum, others who obtain one can find it difficult to use. If this is the case, the vaginal canal and cervix can typically be viewed during a yearly gynecological exam. If this is of interest to you, simply tell the provider that you're curious to see what you look like and ask for a mirror. When the speculum is in place, admire the beauty that is you. Some providers are surprised by this request; others are delighted, and see it as a teachable moment.

Alice!

Category:

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[Genital Wonderings](#) [3]

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Resources

[Medical Services \(Morningside\)](#) [9]

[Medical Services \(CUMC\)](#) [10]

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- ▼ Contact Alice!
 - Content Use
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- [1] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/inside-my-vagina-should-it-feel-smooth-or-bumpy>
- [2] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/sexual-reproductive-health>
- [3] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/genital-wonderings>
- [4] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/about-women>
- [5] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/gynecologist-first-time-0>
- [6] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/rectovaginal-exam-%E2%80%94-purpose>
- [7] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/what-normal-vaginal-discharge-0>
- [8] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/ow-my-nether-lips-labiaplasty>
- [9] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-morningside>
- [10] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/medical-services-cumc>