What exactly is the vulva? [1]

1) Dear Alice,

What is the vulva?

— knowledge-searching person

2) Alice,

Could you please settle an argument for me? Does the vulva in women consist of everything between the pubic mound to the rectum, or is the vagina separate? I thought that the vulva consisted of everything and my sister says that the urethra and vagina aren't included. Thanks

Answer

Dear knowledge-searching person and Reader,

To navigate the planet, humans have studied the stars, invented compasses, drawn maps, and sent GPS satellites into space. But when it comes to charting a voyage around the vulva, many people have missed the boat. To help you better chart this territory, the vulva consists of all of the external (or visible) genitalia often associated with females from the mons pubis (also known as the pubic mound) to, but not including, the anus. Knowing what makes up the vulva and how it works are key parts of cultivating its pleasure — with and without a partner.

Many people mistakenly call the vulva the vagina. The vagina is actually the internal passage that leads from the external genitals (vulva) to the cervix of the uterus. The vulva, from north (belly side) to south (back side), includes:

- **The mons pubis**: This is the rounded, soft, fatty pad of tissue covering the pubic mound on which pubic hair starts to grow during puberty.
- **The labia (lips)**: These are the folds of skin that serve as the eastern and western boundaries of the vulva, framing the vaginal opening. The outer set of lips (labia majora) is often covered with pubic hair, while the inner set of lips (labia minora) is hairless, sometimes, but not always, concealed beneath their outer sisters.
- **The clitoris** [2]: The nerve and pleasure center (or "joy button") is located at the upper
joining of the labia, this mighty lil' pearl is made of erectile tissue similar in composition to
the penis. It becomes engorged with blood and erect during arousal. The clitoris is where
the majority of intense sensations is usually felt, building toward orgasm.

- **The urethral opening**: This is the space from which urine leaves the body. It can be found
  below the clitoris.
- **The vaginal opening (or orifice)**: The area surrounding the vaginal opening (called
  the vestibule) are also considered parts of the vulva, although the vaginal canal itself, which
  leads from the vaginal opening back to the cervix, isn't.

Although the clitoris is where most of the action is for many people, all parts of the vulva are
potential erogenous zones and are worth exploring. Human navigational achievements aside,
there's always more to be discovered when it comes to bodies, especially since the exact
landscape varies from person to person. But, in any case, it's great to be familiar with the ins and
outs of this particular landscape.

So, to summarize, the vagina and urethra aren't considered part of the vulva. Hope this clears
things up and happy exploring!

Alice!

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- Sexual & Reproductive Health [3]
- Genital Wonderings [4]
- Vulvas, Labias, Clitorises, and Vaginas [5]

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