

Genital odor ^[1]

(1) Dear Alice,

For like several years I have been afflicted with a really smelly crotch. It's like I sweat a lot down there and it just has a really sweaty vaginal odor. I bathe regularly but nothing really helps; by the end of the day I always smell funky. This wouldn't gross me out if it was just an occasional problem, but it happens every day. What can I do?

Thanks,
Stinky

(2) Alice,

I have an embarrassing odor problem in the crotch area due to sweating. The odor is the same as underarm body odor. FDS didn't seem to help any. Cornstarch and powders work for about an hour. I wear only cotton panties. It seems that gel deodorants (Mitchum/Soft & Dri) are the only products that will control the odor for more than one hour (not long enough). Is using antiperspirants/deodorants harmful to my body (I do not use it in the clitoral/vaginal region, only on the "mound" of hair)? Also, how can I eliminate this sweating? My friends don't seem to have this problem. I am 32 and the problem seems to worsen each year.

Answer

Dear Stinky and Reader #2,

You bring up two related, but possibly distinct issues: vaginal odor and sweating in the genital area. They are related because sweat can be a factor in causing odor, however odor may be present even without excessive perspiration. Let's address the odor issue first. All women have a vaginal scent that is normal for them; this scent may change throughout a woman's menstrual cycle, becoming stronger and milder at times. Having a vaginal scent is normal and not considered a problem in itself. However if a woman notices that her normal scent suddenly changes, becomes much stronger, or seems foul, it may be an indication of an infection or other medical problem.

Troublesome vaginal odor can be caused by several factors. The most common cause is vaginal

bacterial overgrowth known as bacterial vaginosis, which has a "fishy" or "musty" smell. "Fishy" smells can also result from vaginal infections, such as [trichomoniasis](#) [2], and in some women, from semen in the vagina. The vagina could also smell "yeasty" because of vaginal yeast overgrowths or yeast infections. A moist, sweaty environment promotes overgrowths of normal skin bacteria that could cause vaginal odor. Wearing synthetic underwear, pantyhose, tights, and some exercise clothes prevent air from circulating around the vulva (the outer lips of the vagina).

A physical exam by a health care provider can determine whether vaginal odor is being caused by something that is treatable with a medication, such as for bacterial vaginosis, trichomonas, or yeast. In these cases, the unpleasant smell usually goes away after the treatment. The physical exam can also detect other health problems that might cause unusual body odors. Consider scheduling a visit with a gynecologist or your regular health care provider.

Some basic steps to prevent run-of-the-mill vaginal odor caused by overgrowths of normal skin bacteria include:

- Washing your vulva with warm water and unscented, gentle soap with mild antibacterial action.
- Wearing underwear made from materials that "breathe," such as cotton. Some exercise clothes are now made from manmade materials that wick away sweat — you might want to check those out.
- Wear loose pajama bottoms or a night gown -- or nothing at all -- to let your vulva "breathe." (read [Letting my vagina breath at night](#) [3] in the *Go Ask Alice!* archive).
- Avoid [douching](#) [4]. It's only recommended if it's deemed necessary by and under the direction of a health care provider. Otherwise, douching is **not** recommended.

Here comes the link to perspiration: vaginal odor could also be caused by excessive sweating (known as hyperhidrosis) in your vaginal area because a sweaty environment allows bacteria to proliferate. Applying cornstarch can help control moisture and odor, temporarily, as you have already discovered. Alternatively, some women find they can manage any odor and sweat by bathing twice a day. Antiperspirants also help control sweating and odor, however, like you noted, it's best to avoid applying antiperspirants to mucous membranes. The labia (vaginal lips) and vagina are mucous membranes and may easily be irritated by antiperspirant, or any harsh cosmetic. In addition, it may be helpful for you to avoid conditions of excess heat, and stay clear of diets that are too high in sugar, caffeine, and alcohol, because all of these may also contribute to your problem of vaginal sweating.

Considering that you have already tried many of these remedies, you may have the best luck speaking with your health care provider about the underlying causes of the excessive perspiration. S/he may be able to prescribe a product that could provide you with more relief. You can also find more information about excessive sweating through the [International Hyperhidrosis Society](#) [5].

Best of luck staying dry!

Alice!

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[3] <http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/letting-my-vagina-breathe-night>

[4] <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/douching>

[5] <http://www.sweathelp.org>

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