

Baths: Okay for the vagina? ^[1]

Hi Alice,

My girlfriends and I are debating something: Are baths bad for the vagina?

Answer

Dear Reader,

There's no clear winner in this debate — baths aren't necessarily bad for vaginas, but they aren't always good either. Bubble baths, however, are a different story: adding soap or fragrances and oils to your bath water can cause some vaginal irritation. In fact, using harsh soaps or scented products — such as deodorant sprays, powders, wipes, douches, and the like — can actually disrupt the natural balance of microorganisms that work to keep the vagina healthy. The right balance of bacteria is needed to maintain the pH (the measurement of acidity or basicity) and police the overgrowth of bacteria that can cause infections. After all, the vagina is self-cleaning and it doesn't need too much help to do its job.

With all the advertisements out there for feminine cleaning aids, it might surprise you to know that vaginas are actually capable of taking care of themselves with minimal assistance. The truth is, glands inside your vagina and cervix (a small, donut shaped orifice located at the top of the vagina) secrete fluids which help to flush out old cells daily, keeping the vagina clean. This process depends on that proper balance of microorganisms — and it's why douching is unnecessary and even potentially harmful. And, unless you've been directed to do so by a medical professional, it's good to avoid aggressive cleansing and deodorizing with products that have fragrances and dyes because it can lead to allergic reactions and vaginitis, or inflammation of the vagina.

So what can you do to prevent any discomfort? Keeping your vulva cool, clean, and dry can go a long way to prevent infections. Avoiding bubble baths might be a good idea if you're concerned about possible infection. To maintain a healthy vagina, it's usually enough to wash the vulva once a day with warm water, or mild soap. It's a good idea to thoroughly rinse off any soap you do use, and to towel off completely once you're done bathing or showering. And if you're menstruating that week, don't forget to change tampons or pads regularly (at least four to five times a day). Washing the genital area more often during menstruation might also make you feel more

comfortable and tone down any unwanted smells. Still, keep in mind that any sudden changes in vaginal discharge or odor may be a sign that something isn't quite right, so consider making an appointment with a health care provider if this situation arises. In addition, you might also consider the following prevention strategies:

- Avoid hot tubs or highly chlorinated pools.
- Use only white, unscented toilet paper and wiping from front to back.
- Use cotton-only tampons and menstrual pads.
- Opt for cotton underwear over synthetic fabrics or silks and satins.
- Wear loose-fitting clothing when possible.
- Quickly change out of damp or sweaty clothing (like after hitting the gym or pool).
- Wash and dry undergarments in a separate load without scented detergents or fabric softeners.

With all that being said, there's no need to toss the rubber ducky just yet! If you do choose to draw yourself a bath every now and then, maybe nix the bubbles and try to cut back on soaps and other products that may contain perfumes or dyes. Showering first and scrubbing the rest of your body squeaky clean (with soap) before taking a bath sans soap can also reduce the chance of any irritation — just be sure that the bathtub is also clean before you soak.

Alice!

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