Dear Alice,

Over the past several months, I've noticed a distinct change in my vaginal odor or "scent." It has taken on a more sweet, pungent aroma, which is very different from the musky odor to which I was accustomed. This has me somewhat concerned because I no longer smell like myself! I liken this dilemma to that of an identity crisis!

Is this a natural change in my body — something that will continue to evolve and change as I grow older (I am twenty-five), or could there be a health- or medical-related explanation? A possible dietary deficiency? An illness? Could a change in sexual partners play a part?

— Wants to Know!

Answer

Dear Wants to Know!,

First, it's excellent that you are paying attention to your body and have an awareness of your scent — your own unique signature. Having an idea of what your vaginal secretions typically smell like is wise; knowing what is normal for you can help you recognize any change(s) in your body that might need some attention. That being said, there are some reasons why your scent may seem different than before, some possibilities are benign and others could indicate the need to investigate further.

Natural changes in the body, or particularly unfamiliar fragrances, can sometimes throw folks for a loop. When your scent changed recently, was there anything else in your life that changed at the same time? Many of the factors you mentioned could explain your change in odor. Dietary changes, hormonal changes (such as pregnancy or menopause), and vaginal infections could all affect a person’s vaginal scent. A change in partners could as well, since their bodily fluids (e.g., semen or vaginal secretions) mingling with your own during sex could alter what smells like you. Additionally, you may also notice fluctuations in smells during your menstrual cycle. Of course, if you catch a whiff of something unpleasant, or even a foul odor, that could be indicative of an infection, such as bacterial vaginosis or trichomonas.
In addition to an atypical odor, have you noticed anything else that’s different down below? Have you experienced any irritation, itching, or other symptoms at the same time as this new scent? Taking note of the color, consistency, and frequency of vaginal discharge as well as noticing any additional symptoms may also help you determine if you will benefit from looking into the issue further. For more on these below-the-belt factors and how to address them, take a look at What is normal vaginal discharge? in the Go Ask Alice! Sexual & Reproductive Health archives.

This recent discovery may be nothing to be concerned about, but for peace of mind, you may want to get checked out by your regular health care provider or a gynecologist. It’s perfectly normal to experience natural changes in your body as you grow older. However, if you’re concerned, taking note of what you’re experiencing and getting some professional advice may be a good idea.

Take care,

Alice!

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