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What your vaginal odour could mean

Feminine odour is something all women deal with. And while it's completely natural and normal for your vagina to have some kind of scent, certain vaginal smells can signal something's wrong. Here's how to tell whether the smell 'down there' is normal for you.

Odours to be aware of

"We are just mammals, so of course we have a smell or scent that will partly come from our genitals," explains Dr Karen Morton, consultant gynaecologist and founder of [Dr Morton's](#).

That said, Morton reminds us that the odours are not meant to be unpleasant and if the vaginal discharge has a fishy or pungent smell there is nearly always something wrong.

So, what happens to throw off your smell and turn it into something disagreeable? For starters, the vagina is self-cleaning and has its own helpful bacteria and yeast, explains Dr Tami Prince, gynaecologist at Women's Health and Wellness Center of Georgia.

"It has an acidic pH and when this balance of normal acidic pH and good bacteria is upset, this may manifest as odour and signal potential infection."

Here are seven of the more common reasons the smell of your vagina might change:

Bacterial vaginosis

The most common explanation for an unpleasant vaginal odour is an infection called [bacterial vaginosis \(BV\)](#), which produces a fishy smell.

Prince says the normally acidic vagina becomes overgrown with bacteria, making it become more alkaline. In addition to the fishy odour, women can also experience itching, irritation and a yellowish/creamy [discharge](#).

Your GP can examine your vagina for signs of discharge, perform a laboratory test on a sample of vaginal fluid, or check the pH level of your vagina to see if BV is present. [Antibiotics](#) (both topical and oral) are the preferred method for treating BV.

"Some women are unfortunately prone to frequent bacterial vaginosis infections while others are fortunate enough never to have any infections," she adds.

A forgotten tampon

Putrid smells can denote a foreign object such as a forgotten tampon.

"The worst smell comes from a forgotten tampon," says Morton.

"In this case, the bacteria have multiplied in the object like an abscess, but once removed, the smell should go away," explains Prince.

If you can't remove the tampon yourself, Prince recommends making a trip to your GP or nearest [sexual health clinic](#) to have it removed. Aside from an unpleasant smell, it's also particularly important to get your tampon removed quickly if you have [pelvic pain](#) or a high fever. In rare instances, toxic shock syndrome (TSS) can result from bacteria entering the bloodstream, which can be life-threatening.

An STI

Morton says an infection such as [trichomonas](#), which is a sexually transmitted infection (STI), can cause your vagina to have an odour. This infection usually produces a fishy smell. Your GP can examine you and get a laboratory test to diagnose trichomonas. The preferred method of treatment is antibiotics. It is important that both you and your partner get treated.

Certain foods

Urologist Dr Michael Ingber from The Center for Specialised Health in New Jersey, says that what you eat and drink can affect the way your vagina smells. That's why he usually tells women to pay attention to what affects their odour at any given time.

If you find that your normal scent is off and you've been eating more processed foods, try increasing your intake of fruit and vegetables and see if that makes a difference.

Cervical cancer

While not a common cause of vaginal odours, one of the symptoms of [cervical cancer](#) is a foul-smelling blood stained discharge. The culprit: the odour results from the dying cancerous cells present in the cervix.

Sweat

A sweaty vagina is definitely a smelly one. When you sweat, especially while exercising, your sweat glands in your groin secrete an oily fluid that's metabolised by bacteria on your skin. This produces a noticeable smell that you can detect after a strenuous exercise session.

Your period

It's not uncommon to notice a strong scent when you're menstruating. Since blood has a higher pH level, your vaginal flora can get thrown off a little during your period and "you may notice a metallic smell," says Prince. This type of smell should resolve once menstruation ends though.

Tips to reduce vaginal odours

You can't eliminate all smells, but you can reduce the intensity of an odour by practising certain hygiene protocols. If you're experiencing a change in your vaginal scent, try a few of these recommendations to see if you can take care of it on your own. But know that if you have recurrent issues with odour and/or infections, it's best to see your GP for proper diagnosis and treatment.

Change your clothes immediately after exercising

The best thing you can do is keep your groin area as dry as possible, and one of the best ways to do that is to change out of your sweaty clothes as soon as possible.

Don't douche

All healthy vaginas contain bacteria and yeast. The normal acidity of your vagina keeps bacteria and yeast in check, essentially cleaning itself. If you douche (flushing water up into the vagina), you can upset this delicate balance.

Morton says water is the best cleaning fluid with a simple non-scented shower gel or soap when it comes to cleaning the area outside your vagina (your **vulva**). She sees a lot of **eczema** of the vulval skin which is much more fragile than the skin on your hands. Her words of advice: "Be gentle with it."

Avoid bubble baths or frequent use of panty liners

Since the vagina is self-cleaning, Prince says either of these activities can also upset the delicate balance of good bacteria, potentially resulting in odour or infection.

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