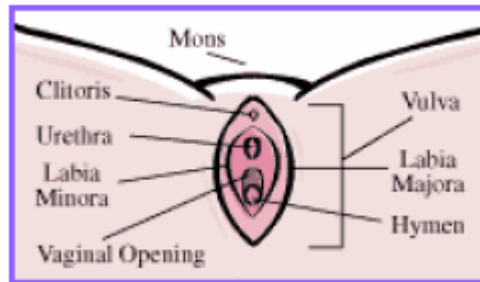


Anatomy

This is information central on a woman's private parts.

Yeah, the idea may be frightening, especially if anatomy has never been your subject.

This is painless. And interesting. And you can wow your doctor with some new vocabulary at your next visit.



Outer Genitals

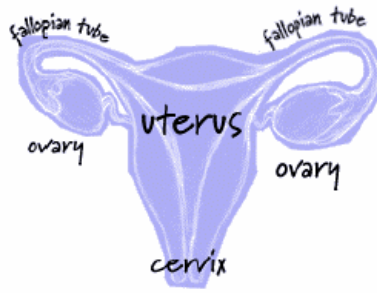
The best way to learn is to look. O.k., these parts are totally in an inconvenient place for easy visual access, and maybe you've never even seen them before. You might be more comfortable with referring to the illustrations on this sheet. If you want to take a look at the real thing, the next step is to get a mirror and flashlight to hold between your legs. This may seem awkward and embarrassing, but it's really just a part of you. There is really nothing to be embarrassed about.

Ready?

On the outside, that whole area you're looking at is called the vulva or "external genitalia." At the top of the genital region, where your pubic hair is, you'll feel a round bone called the mons. Now look below. See the soft flaps of skin? These are the labia majora (outer lips). In young girls, these are small and smooth. In developed girls and adult women, they're darker and wrinklier and covered with pubic hair. Inside the protective outer lips, you'll find another, more delicate pair of lips called the labia minora (inner lips). There's a lot of variation in appearance here: Some women's inner lips are bigger than their outer ones, some are more wrinkled or paler or darker. Like everything else in life, one size does not fit all. Between your inner lips, high up, is a protective fold of skin. This is called the clitoral hood. Gently pull it back. Find the teeny, round bulge? This is your clitoris, which plays an important, positive role in a woman's sexuality. The clitoris is rich with nerve endings and extremely sensitive. Continue on down to the urethra. See it? It's that small opening right below your clitoris. This is where urine comes out. Below your urethra, you'll see a larger opening, which is your vagina, the pathway in and out of your reproductive system. It may be partially covered by your hymen, a thin stretch of skin. Some young women don't have a hymen at all. Others have stretched it or torn it using tampons or exercising. Some hymens tear naturally in childhood, some during puberty. Some hymens have one hole while others have several. A hymen is not an indicator of virginity at all. A virgin is someone who hasn't had sexual intercourse. Plenty of virgins have barely noticeable hymens; non-virgins may even have intact, though stretched, hymens.

The Vagina

The vaginal opening is the connection between your external and internal genitals. Check it out. If you insert a finger, you can feel the moist walls. Generally speaking, the vagina is a canal that measures about 3 to 5 inches in length from the vaginal opening to the cervix--the lower part of the uterus. Stretchable. That's the vagina. It can accommodate a tampon and allow a baby to come through. The vagina is also an incredibly clean organ. Thanks to your body's own natural secretions, it flushes out dead cells. The helpful cleansing fluid, which can be clear or whitish, depending on the time of the month, is known as discharge. While some vaginal discharge has a slight smell--there are some things to watch out for. It shouldn't have a strong bad odor. It shouldn't appear green or deep yellow. It shouldn't be itchy or burning. And, it shouldn't be extra-clumpy or full of blood (unless you have your period.) If you have any of these symptoms, make an appointment to talk to one of the Midwives or Doctors here at the Adler Center.



The Cervix

The cervix is the next stop. Reach as far back as you can into your vagina and you may be able to feel your cervix, the lower part of your uterus. How can you tell? If you press on it gently, you may find that it feels like an enlarged version of the tip of your nose, perhaps with a small dimple in the center. It's pretty firm, but can be moved around a little. The dimple you may feel in the center of your cervix is the opening of the cervix,--the os. "Os" rhymes with "floss." Menstrual flow passes out of the uterus through the os, down the vaginal canal and out the vaginal opening. Traveling in the opposite direction, sperm enter the uterus through the os to fertilize the egg. And, although the os is usually very tiny, it can dilate wide enough to permit a baby to pass through. As you can see (and/or feel), the cervix closes off the upper end of the vagina. Ever wonder why you don't have to worry about tampons getting lost inside you? They can't. The os is "locked." They've got nowhere to go but back out, through your vaginal opening.

The Uterus

On the other side of the cervix is your uterus, sometimes called the womb. This hollow, pear-shaped organ is very muscular and strong. Normally it's the size of a fist, but it can expand remarkably during pregnancy...enough to hold a fully developed baby! It gets small again after a baby is born. The lining of the uterus, called the endometrium, is designed to hold and nourish a developing fetus; it is this lining that is flushed from the body during your period.

At its upper portion, the uterus branches into two tubes, called fallopian tubes, each about 3 inches long. These are passageways connecting the uterus and the ovaries, where the egg cells develop. The fringe-like tissue at the ends of each tube, called "fimbriae," help to sweep the egg up from an ovary into the fallopian tube and toward the uterus. The inside of a fallopian tube is no wider than the diameter of a human hair. While the egg may be fertilized inside the fallopian tube or in the uterus, cells inside the tube exist specifically to swoosh the egg into the uterus for development. The end of each fallopian tube almost touches an ovary. Ovaries produce and house unfertilized eggs, and ovaries are where the female sex hormones estrogen and progesterone do their thing. Each ovary is about the size of a large strawberry. We're born with all our eggs (or ova) -- hundreds of thousands! They're contained in sacs called follicles. When puberty hits, hormones give the order for these eggs to ripen one at a time. At each menstrual cycle, an ovary releases one mature egg.

And that's it. You have successfully completed your tour.

This information is from the Adler Center for Women's Health in Virginia.