



VAGINA MATTERS



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For more information visit: vaginamatters.org

Fine Acts

Daye

brook



To all girls
(and not only)

Before we dive in, we want to make sure that everyone feels invited to the *Vagina Matters* community — no matter their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, race, religion, disability, ethnicity or country of origin. We recognise and respect that people's bodies and identities are unique and diverse. What is more, not every person with a vulva identifies as a woman or girl. We know that everyone has different experiences and that some of our tips and advice might not be for you.

This book was created for young people between the ages of 12 and 14 in mind, but we encourage people of all ages to read it.

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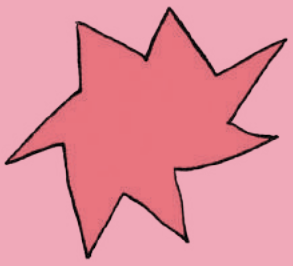
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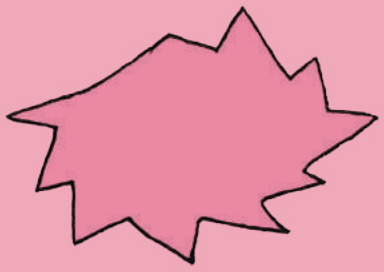
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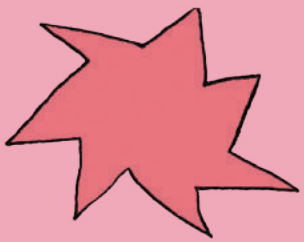
Although women make up more than half of the world's population, many still struggle with societal stereotypes and stigmas. As a result, women and girls are often unable to speak freely about their bodies, without shame or worry. Growing up can be weird and complicated, and sometimes it can be difficult to ask grown-ups for advice. That's why we created the *Vagina Matters* book. We want to encourage people to be curious about issues that are crucial to their development and understanding of themselves. We believe that exploring and talking about sexual health will help young people to grow up with more ease and confidence, becoming strong and courageous adults.

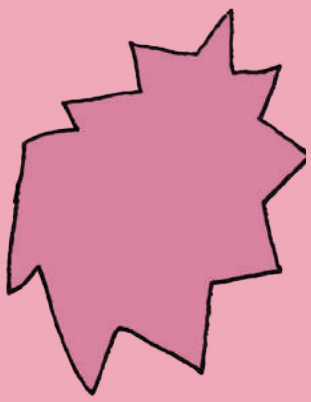






All young people have the right to inclusive and science-based Relationships and Sex Education (RSE). It's the best way to keep them safe, healthy, and help them develop strong and enjoyable relationships. With its unique illustrations, *Vagina Matters* offers a positive and interactive approach to sexual health. It's a great starting point for topics such as the body, menstruation, masturbation, sex and more. We focused on topics that form the core of sex education. We sincerely hope that *Vagina Matters* will inspire you to explore these issues in more depth, engage critically with your surroundings, provoke questions and encourage you to speak freely about your sexual health.






chapter 1
KNOW YOUR BODY


i ♥
MY
VAGINA

How well do you know your vulva?



The vulva is your external genitalia (the bits you can see). It turns out that almost 60% of women don't know *where* their vulva is or *what* it is. Many adults even have difficulties naming parts of the female reproductive system correctly. Test your knowledge with our anatomy quiz! Label all the parts of the vulva in the illustration on the next page.



flip over

We often refer to the external genital organs as the vagina, but actually the correct term is the vulva. The vulva is made up of:

A. **The mons pubis** (or pubic mound) is a rounded mass of fatty tissue that is located over the pubic bone and is covered with pubic hair.

B. The **labia majora** (or outer labia) are fleshy folds of tissue covered in pubic hair. The outer labia protect the inner parts of the vulva.

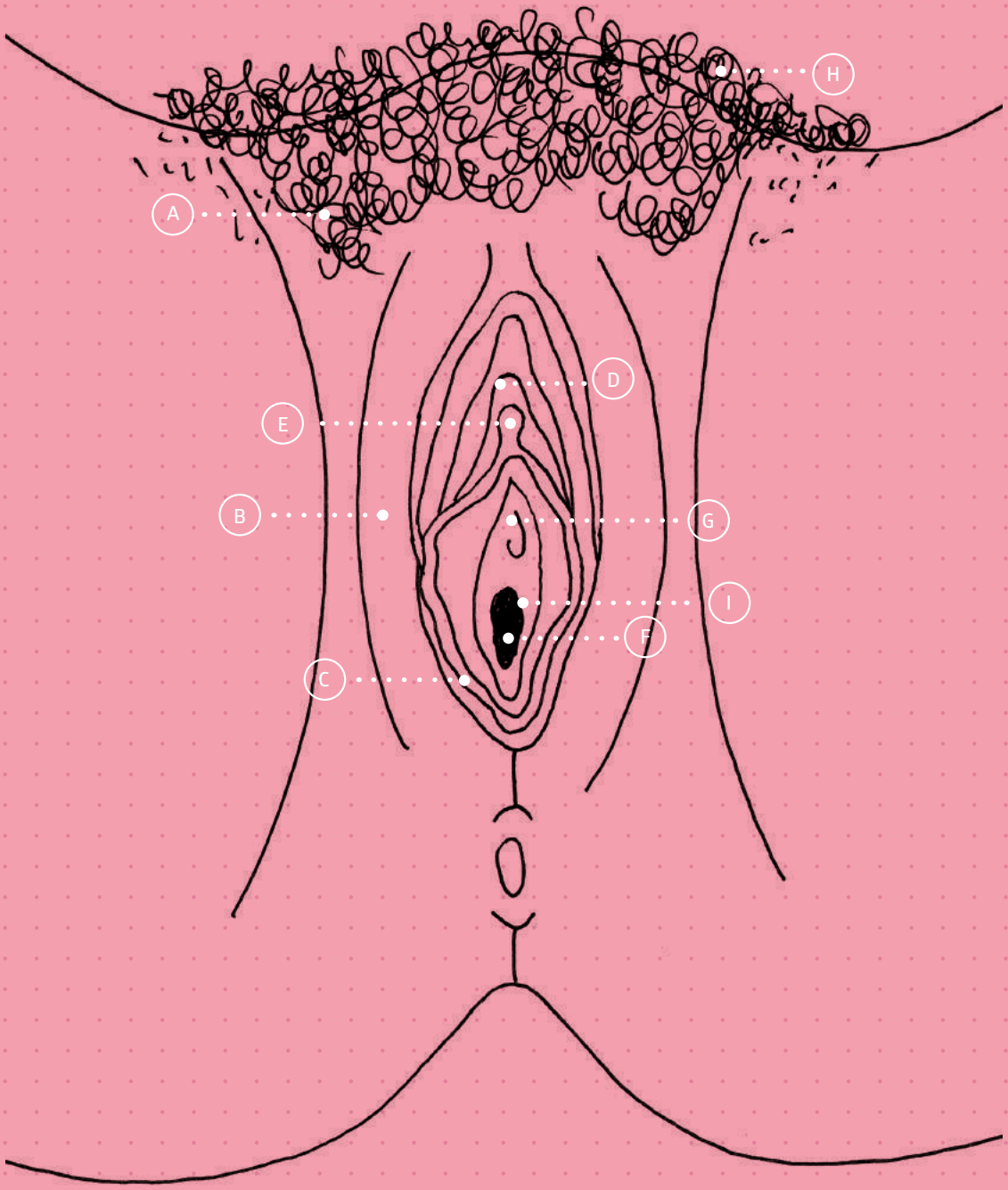
C. The **labia minora** (or inner labia) are less fleshy than the outer labia, and don't have pubic hair on them. They protect the vaginal opening, clitoris and urethra. Everyone's labia looks different, there is no 'normal' size, shape or colour.

D. The **clitoral hood** is a fold of skin that surrounds and protects the head of the clitoris.

E. The **clitoris** plays the leading role in sexual pleasure. In fact, this is its sole purpose! The clitoris has lots of nerve endings and can be sensitive to touch.

Test your knowledge by matching the parts of the vulva in the illustration. Unfold the next page to see the answers.

flip over

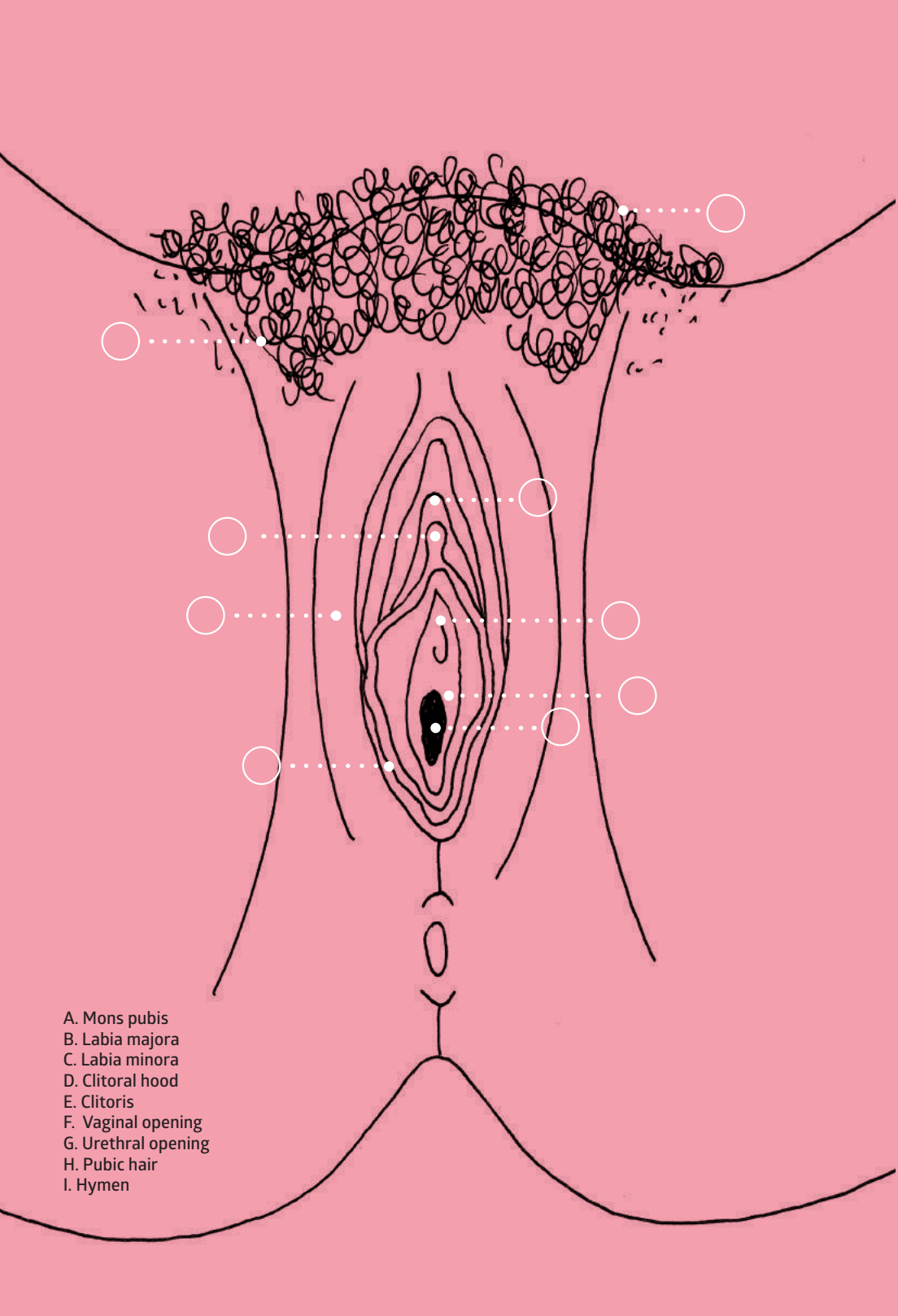

A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I

F. The **vaginal opening** is right below your urethral opening. This is the opening to the vagina, an elastic muscular canal that connects the uterus to the vulva. The vagina has many functions. During a period, the vaginal opening is where menstrual blood comes out, and where tampons or menstrual cups are inserted. Vaginal penetrative sex is when a penis enters the vagina *(read more about different types of sex in Chapter 6)*. Additionally, during childbirth, a baby passes from the uterus through the vagina and out into the world.

G. The **urethral opening** is a tiny hole, located just below your clitoris. It's the opening to the urethra, a canal that carries urine out of the bladder (where you pee from).

H. **Pubic hair** starts growing during puberty. It can be found in the genital area and sometimes on the upper inner thighs and towards the belly button. Usually the hair is thicker, darker and curlier than other body hair.

I. The **hymen** is a thin membrane that surrounds or partially covers the vaginal opening. Most hymens are doughnut-shaped and open in the centre. It is a permanent part of the body. The hymen actually stretches or thins over time through all sorts of activities, including sports, gynae-cological check-ups, tampon or menstrual cup use, and sexual activity.



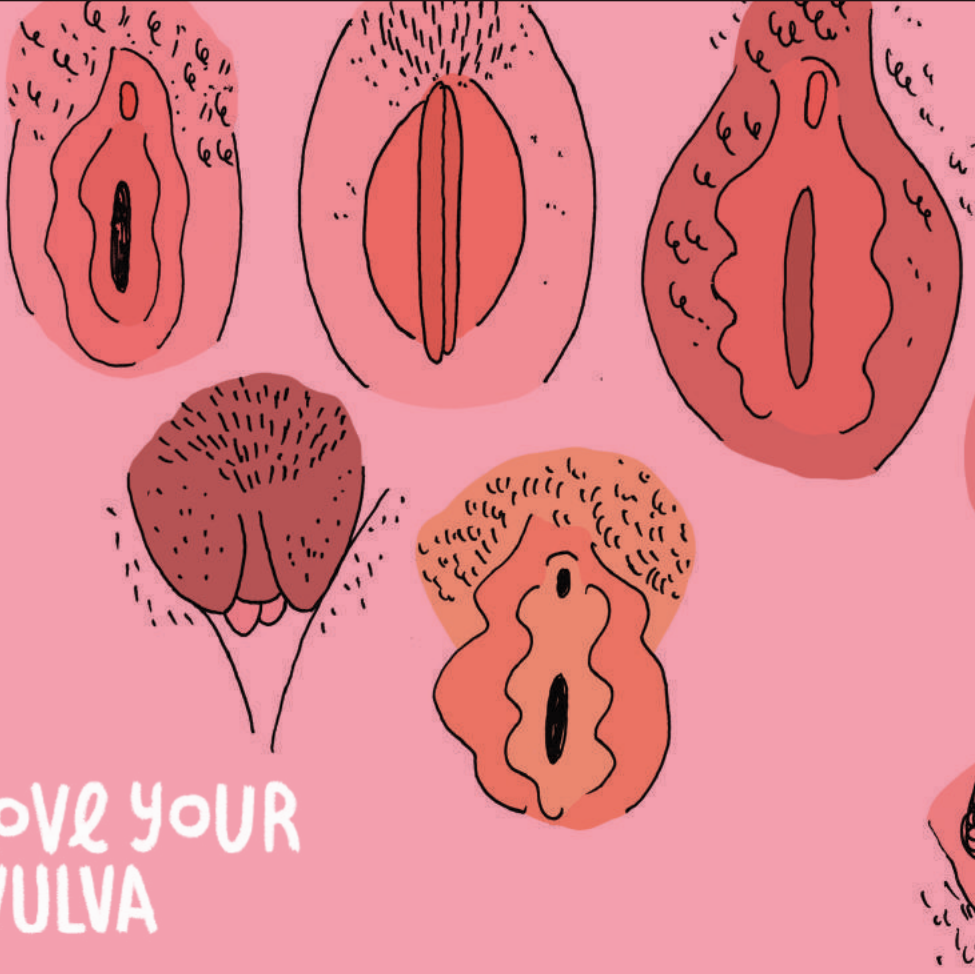
A. Mons pubis
B. Labia majora
C. Labia minora
D. Clitoral hood
E. Clitoris
F. Vaginal opening
G. Urethral opening
H. Pubic hair
I. Hymen

WHERE DOES ALL THE SHAME COME FROM?

Different cultures have different views of the vulva. Some ancient religions and societies have celebrated vaginas and vulvas, but in Western societies there has been a largely negative attitude. Did you know that the medical terminology related to the female reproductive anatomy is derived from Latin? For example, *pudendum* (*pudenda* in plural) literally translates to 'the shameful parts'. Not only that, much of the medical terms concerning genitals contain the verb *pudere*, 'to be ashamed of'. While the term has largely been dropped from the English language, the same can't be said of other languages, where the word 'shame' still takes a central role in defining genitalia.

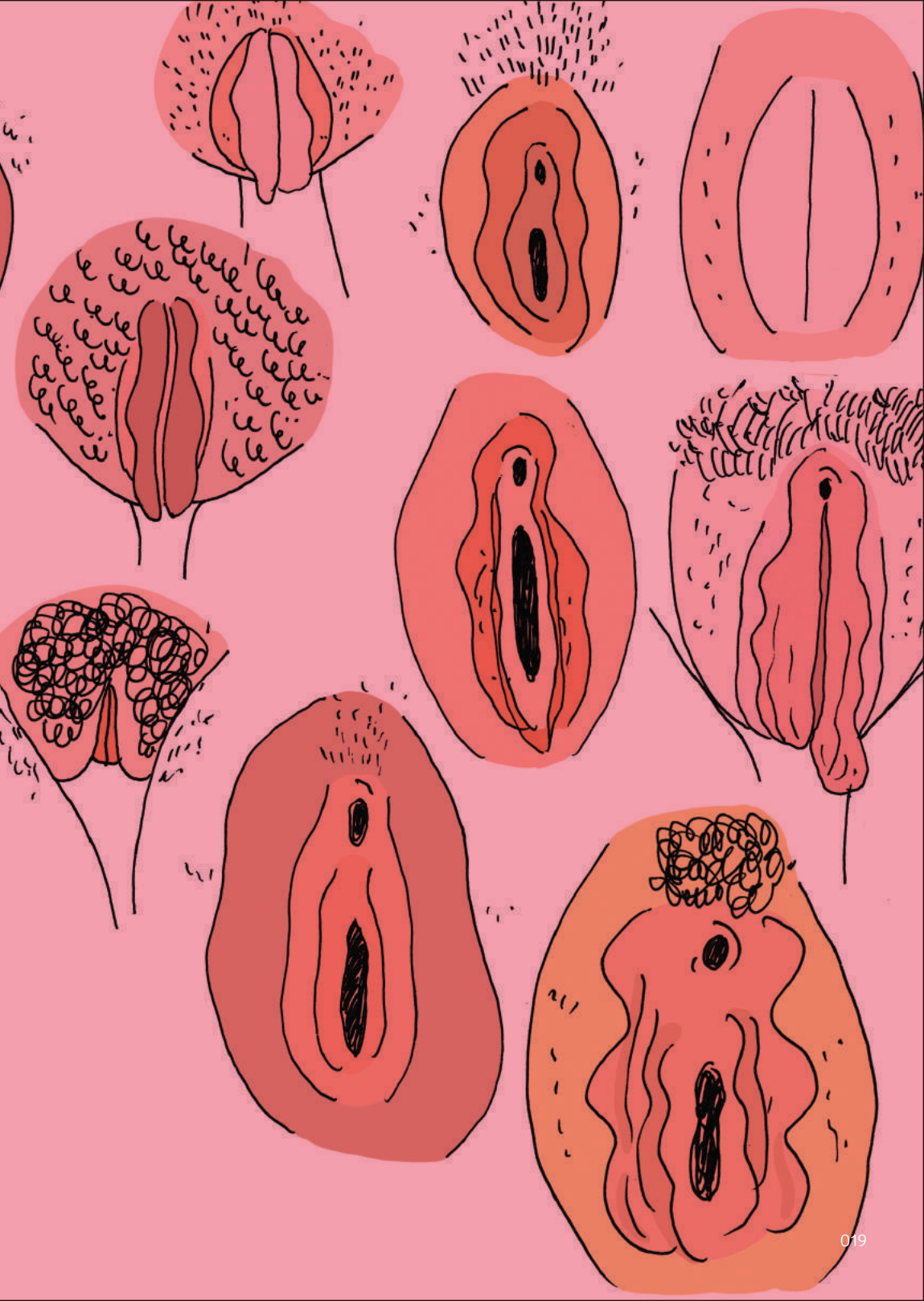
THERE IS NOTHING SHAMEFUL ABOUT GENITALS





LOVE YOUR VULVA

Vulvas come in all shapes, sizes and colours. Some have asymmetrical inner labia, while others have more pronounced, curved or dangling ones. Same goes for the outer labia—they can also be long or small, closed or open. Sometimes the inner labia are longer than the outer ones, other times it's the opposite. Vulvas are so diverse that there is no standard for how they should look. They are all normal and beautiful.







GET TO KNOW YOUR VULVA

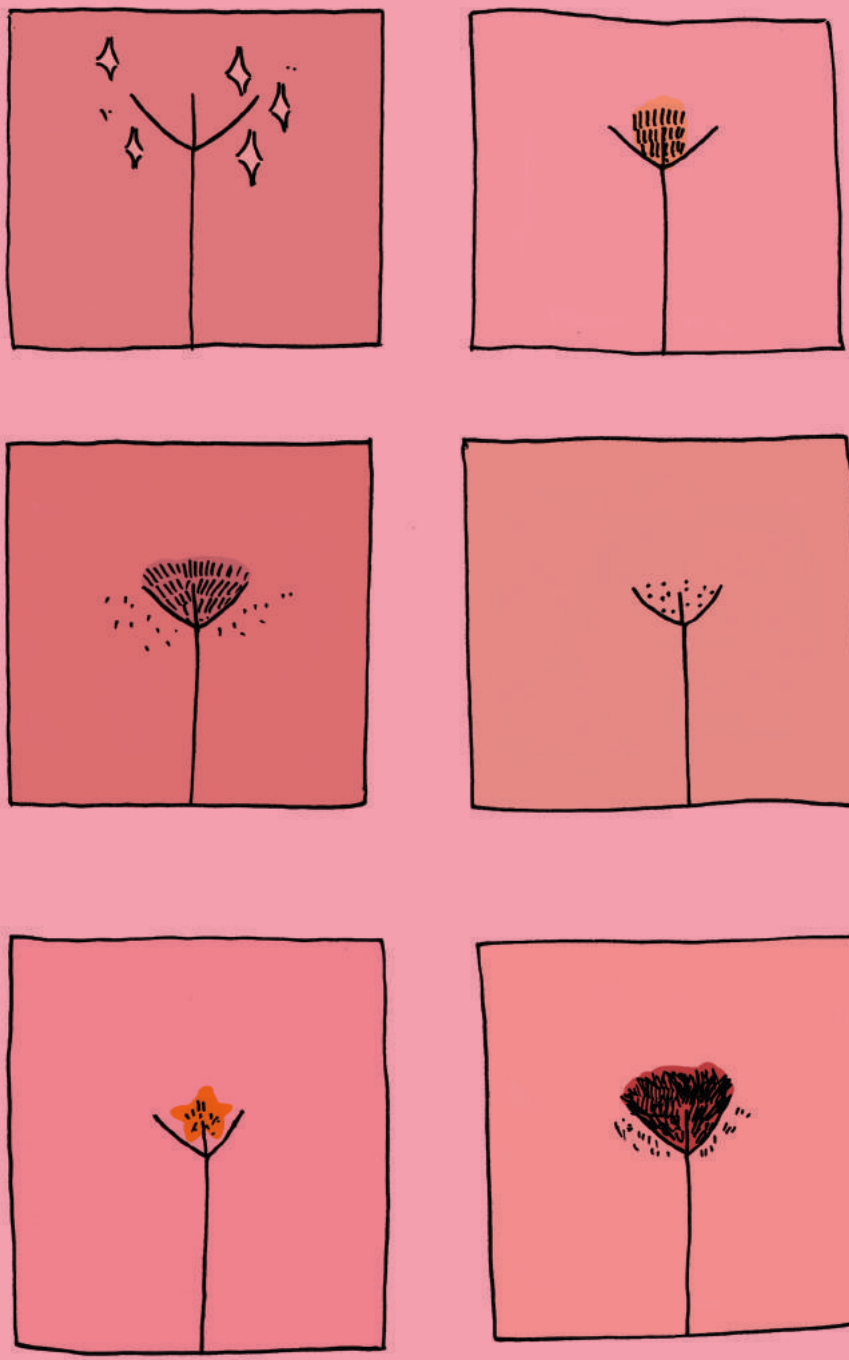
Take time to get to know your vulva. You can use a hand mirror to explore and get used to your body. Draw your vulva here or on a separate sheet of paper.

PUBIC HAIR IS FOR PROTECTION

Pubic hair grows around the vulva, on the mons pubis and the outer labia. There is a common misconception that it is more hygienic to trim, shape or remove pubic hair, and globally there is a trend that encourages this. In fact, like most things on the body, pubic hair is there for a reason. It's designed to protect your body from harmful bacteria, and evidence suggests that removing it can make the vulva and vagina more vulnerable to irritation and infection. Pubic hair also reduces friction during sex, and without it you may be vulnerable to skin irritation too.







MY BODY, MY RIGHTS

It's up to you to decide whether to remove or keep your pubic hair as it is. You don't have to remove your hair just because that's what current trends dictate, or because your partner wants you to. Your only guiding principle should be how you feel about it, and what your preference is. Keeping clean means maintaining good general hygiene (such as regular bathing or showering, and changing your underwear daily). Being clean has nothing to do with pubic hair removal.



WHAT ABOUT THE INTERNAL REPRODUCTIVE ORGANS?

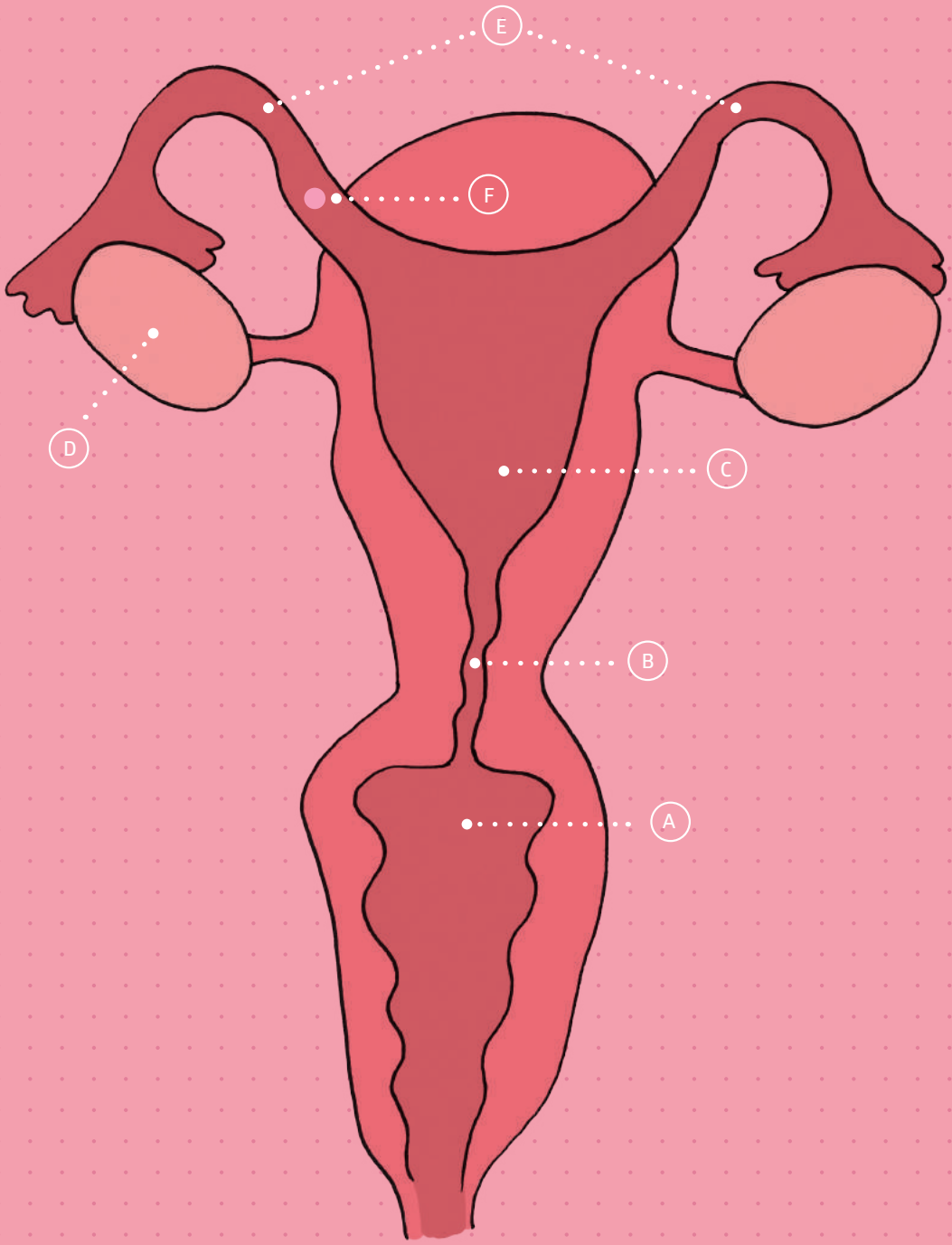
Let's take a look inside! Check what you know about your internal reproductive organs.

A. The **vagina** is a muscular canal that connects the uterus to the vulva.

B. The **cervix** is the doughnut-shaped lower part of the uterus that connects to the vagina.

C. The **uterus** (or womb) is a pear-shaped organ made of strong muscle tissue. During the menstrual cycle, the mucous membrane that covers the walls of the uterus (called the endometrium) sheds—that's what a period is made of. The uterus is also where, during pregnancy, a foetus (from the eighth week of pregnancy until birth) will grow. Incredibly strong, the uterus expands when it needs to carry a foetus.

flip over


E
F
D
C
B
A

D. The **ovaries** are located on either side of the uterus and are as large as a walnut. During puberty your ovaries will begin to produce a complex combination of hormones. These are important for your reproductive health and will ensure the release of an egg each month.

E. The **fallopian tubes** connect the uterus to the ovaries. Fallopian tubes are about 10 cm long. During ovulation, when an egg is released from the ovary, it travels down the fallopian tube to the uterus.

F. The **ovum** (or egg) is the female reproductive cell capable of developing into a new organism when fertilised. Once inside the fallopian tube, it lives for 12 to 24 hours. If the egg doesn't come into contact with sperm, it will leave the body with the menstrual blood during your next period. If you've had unprotected sex, it's possible that the egg and sperm will meet in the fallopian tube and the fertlised egg will then travel into the uterus and implant to develop into a pregnancy.

Fact:

You are born with all the eggs that you will ever release during your lifetime. At birth, you have approximately two million!

Fact:

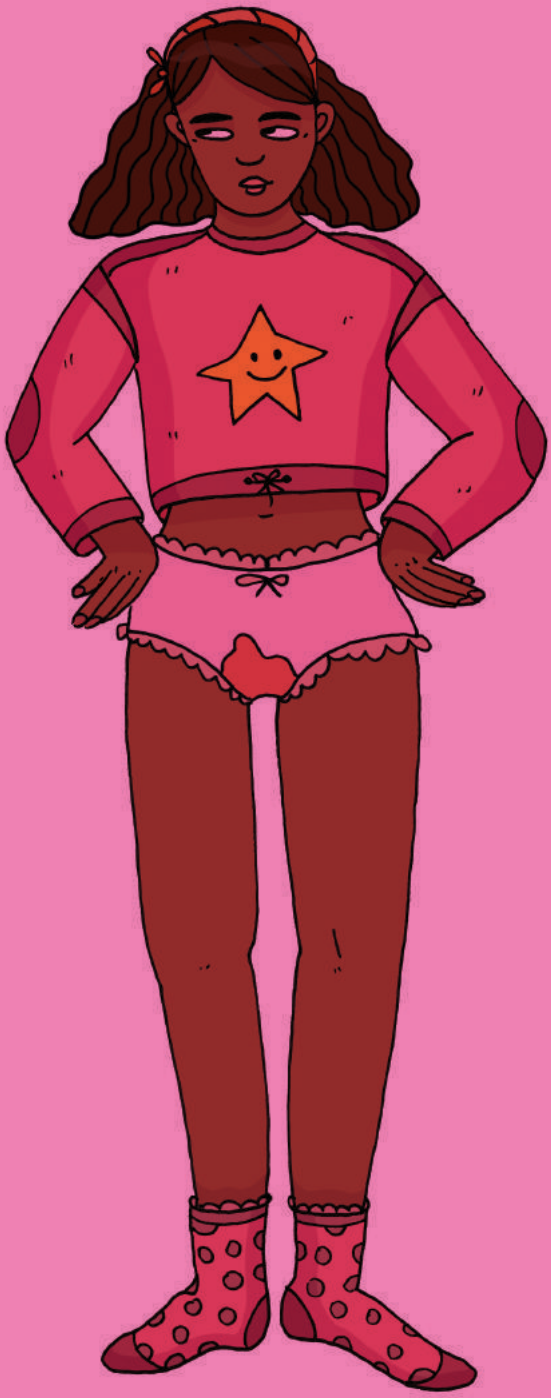
An egg is on average 16 times larger than a sperm.

chapter 2

menstruation

Knowledge is power! Understanding your menstrual cycle can help you understand your body. This cycle is an important part of your life and can affect everything from mental health to cognitive function, energy levels, libido, skin health and even bowel movements (pooping).

It's important to remember that not everyone who identifies as a woman has a period, and not everyone with a period identifies as a woman! *(Read more about gender in Chapter 4)*.





WHAT IS THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE?

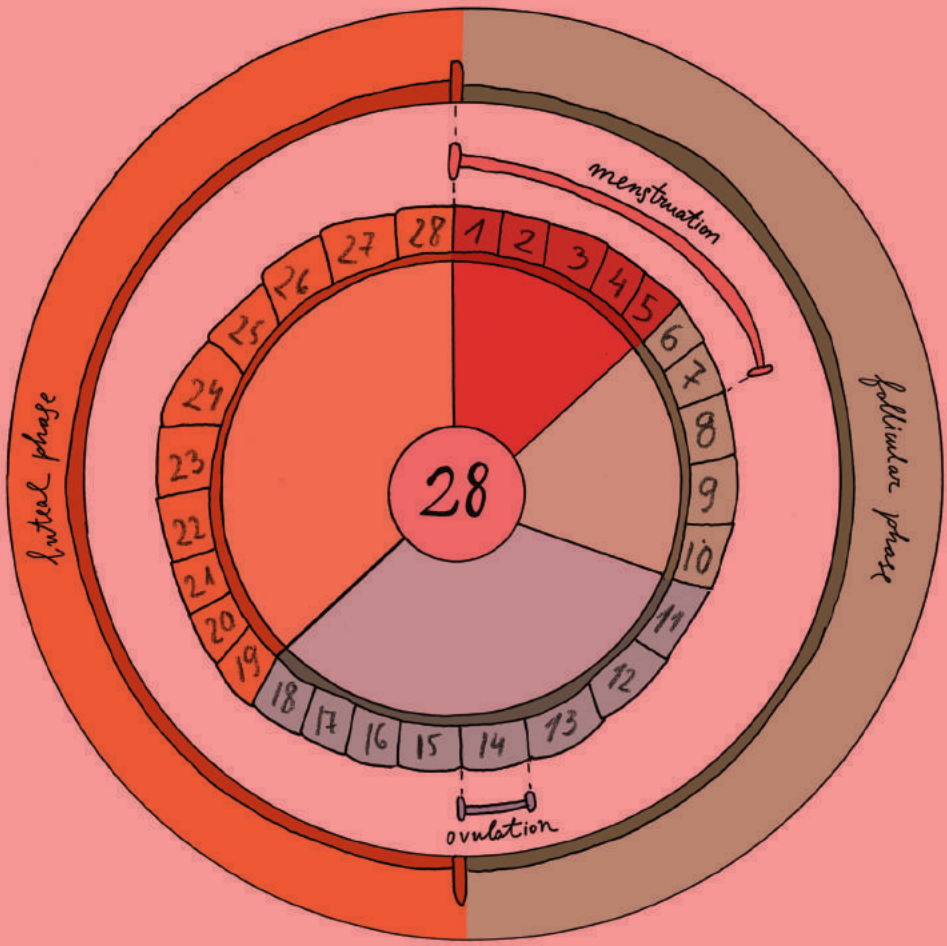
The menstrual cycle starts with the first day of your period and lasts until the first day of your next period. On average, the cycle is 28 days, but this varies from person to person. It can also be anywhere between 21 and 35 days.



DID YOU KNOW THAT...?

The term '**menstruation**' is derived from the Latin word '**menstruus**', which means monthly. Before important scientific discoveries were made proving that the menstrual cycle is a natural occurrence triggered by hormonal changes, it was believed that menstruation was influenced by the lunar phases.

THE MOON ORBITS AROUND THE EARTH IN 29.5 DAYS.



THE FOUR MENSTRUAL PHASES

Each menstrual cycle consists of:

1. Menstruation

Between days 1–5: The first day of your menstrual cycle is the first day of your period. At this stage, the thick lining of the uterus, which starts growing during the follicular phase *(see next pages)*, sheds along with the unfertilised egg and some blood through the vagina. Menstruation usually lasts about five days, but can vary anywhere from three to ten days. At this time it is normal to experience symptoms such as menstrual pain and cramps, breast sensitivity, bloating, lower back pain and diarrhoea—all the fun stuff! As abrupt hormonal changes occur in the body, you may also feel more tired.



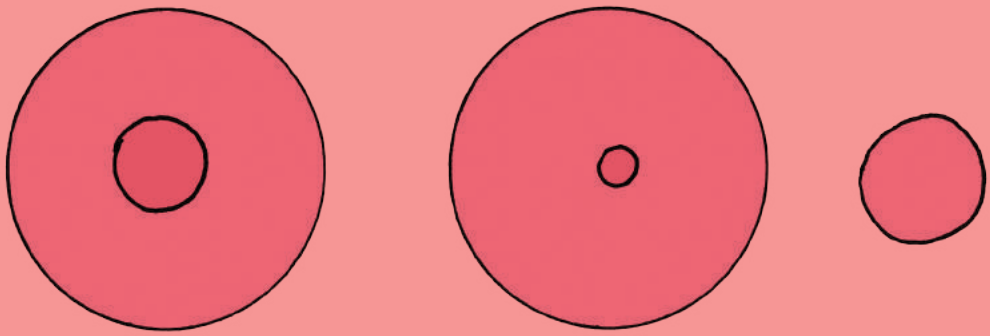
2. Follicular phase

Between days 1–13: The first few days of this phase overlap with the menstrual phase (confusing, we know). At the end of your period, the hormone oestrogen begins to rise, which signals to your body to re-thicken the lining of the uterus, preparing it for a potential pregnancy.



3. Ovulation

Around day 14: When oestrogen levels are at their peak, they signal to your brain to start producing the luteinising hormone (LH), which causes one of the ovaries to release an egg. Ovulation only lasts one or two days, and it's during this phase that you're most likely to get pregnant. At this stage, if the egg is not fertilised by a sperm, it will be discarded during your next period. It's important to remember that you can still get pregnant if you have unprotected sex before or after you ovulate, as sperm can live in your body for up to seven days.



4. LUTEAL PHASE

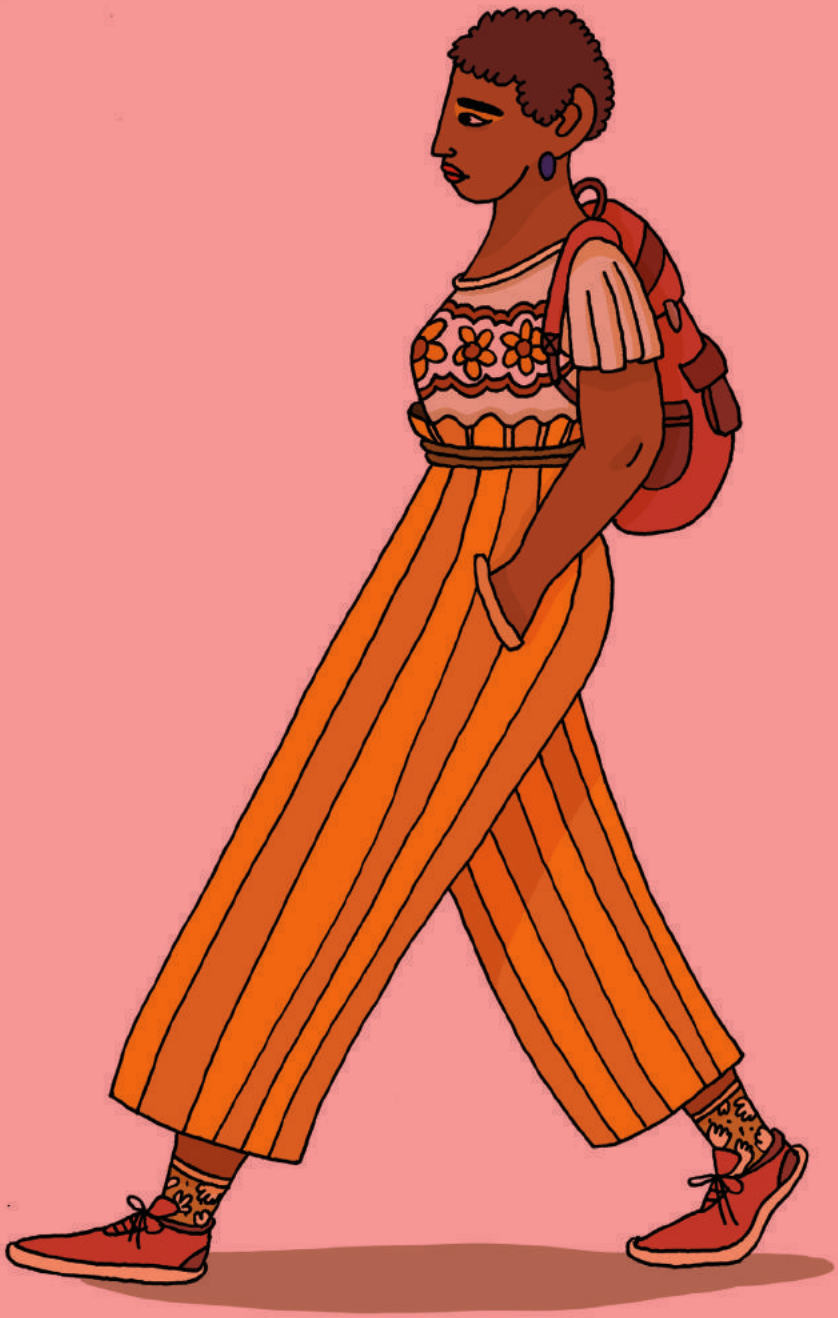
Between days 15–28: When ovulation ends, the uterine lining continues to thicken, thanks to the hormone progesterone, in preparation to receive a fertilised egg. The last day of this phase is the day before your next period and the last day of your menstrual cycle. This is the longest phase of the cycle and it's possible that in the days leading up to your period, you may feel more sluggish than usual or experience breast sensitivity, mood swings and bloating.

WHO MENSTRUATES?

Not everyone with a uterus and a period identifies as a woman. The variety of people who menstruate can include trans men, intersex people, and non-binary folk. Menstruation is a biological function, but it's not necessarily something exclusively 'female'. It's an experience that can be very diverse and can have a different meaning for different people. In rare cases, a woman may be born with an underdeveloped or absent vagina or uterus, and may not be able to menstruate. We should talk openly about menstruation without excluding others.

NOT EVERY WOMAN HAS A MENSTRUAL CYCLE.

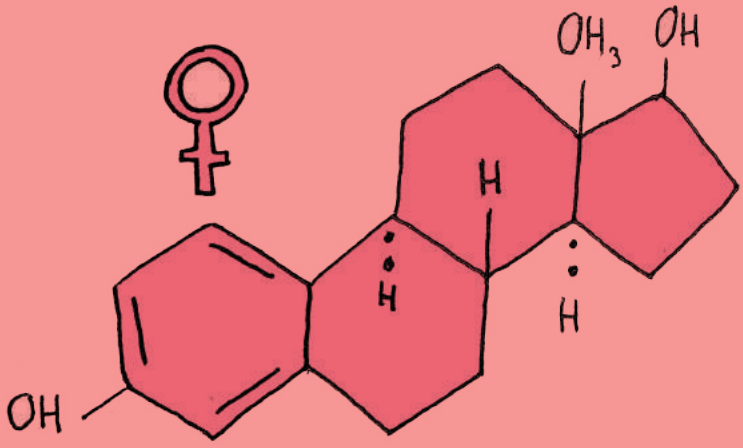
NOT EVERYONE WITH A MENSTRUAL CYCLE IS A WOMAN.





HORMONES

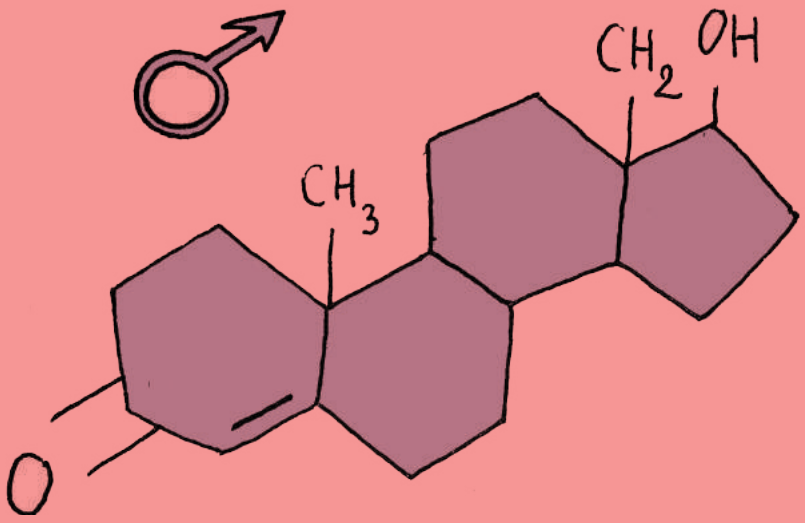
Hormones are chemical substances that act as messengers in the body. The hormones that play a key role in the menstrual cycle are oestrogen and progesterone. They have different effects on the body, such as repairing and thickening the uterine lining. During the menstrual cycle, hormone levels fluctuate all the time.



Oestrogen and progesterone are the two main hormones produced by the ovaries.

Luteinising hormone (LH) and follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) are hormones that are produced in the pituitary gland, found at the bottom of the brain. LH causes ovulation and FSH regulates ovarian function.

Testosterone is commonly referred to as the 'male sex hormone', but everyone produces it! Biological women simply produce it in smaller quantities. It plays a key role in libido, as well as overall health.



i'm BLEEDING!

When puberty begins, you will notice lots of physical, hormonal and emotional changes. Sometimes these happen very quickly and suddenly, for other people they can occur gradually and slowly. The most notable changes you will experience during puberty are: menstruation begins, your nipples and breasts become bigger, and hair starts appearing on your armpits, legs, genitals and other parts of your body. You may also start producing more sweat. During puberty you'll also likely grow taller,



your hips may start to get wider, your skin and hair may get more oily and you might develop acne on your face, back or chest. Everyone experiences these changes at a different age and in a different order. The average age for the first period is 12 years, but it can happen at any age between 9 and 17, so don't worry if your period starts sooner or later compared to others—it's not a race! In the beginning, your period will most probably be irregular and will take some time to adjust.

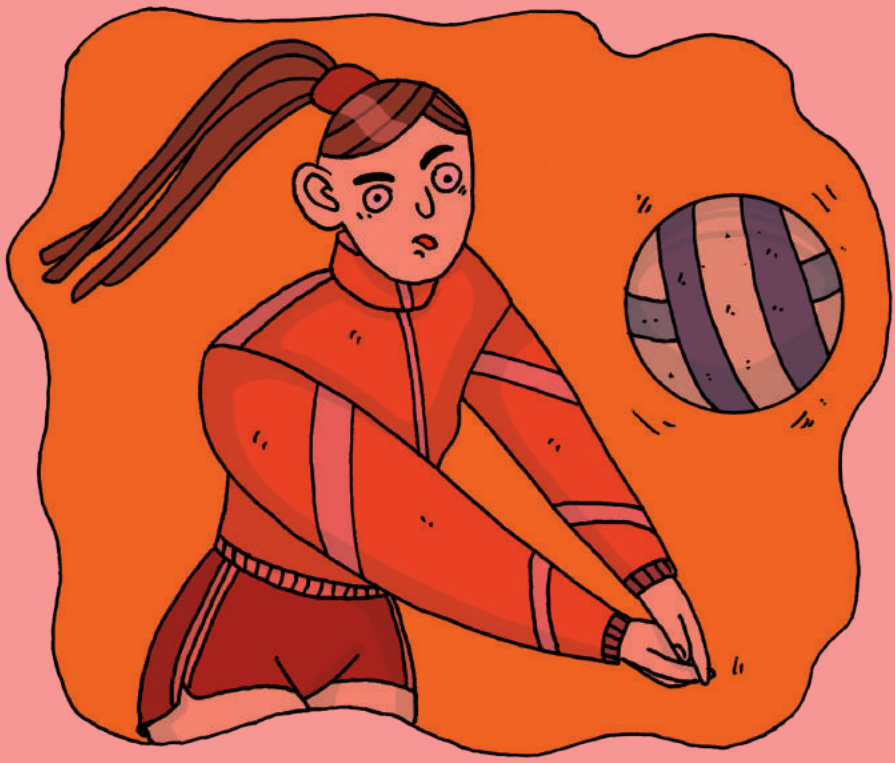


menarche

Your first period **(or menarche)** can be quite a scary experience, especially if you're not prepared and don't know what to expect. But it doesn't have to be scary! As uncomfortable and emotional as it may be, menstruation is a normal process and signals an important change in your body.

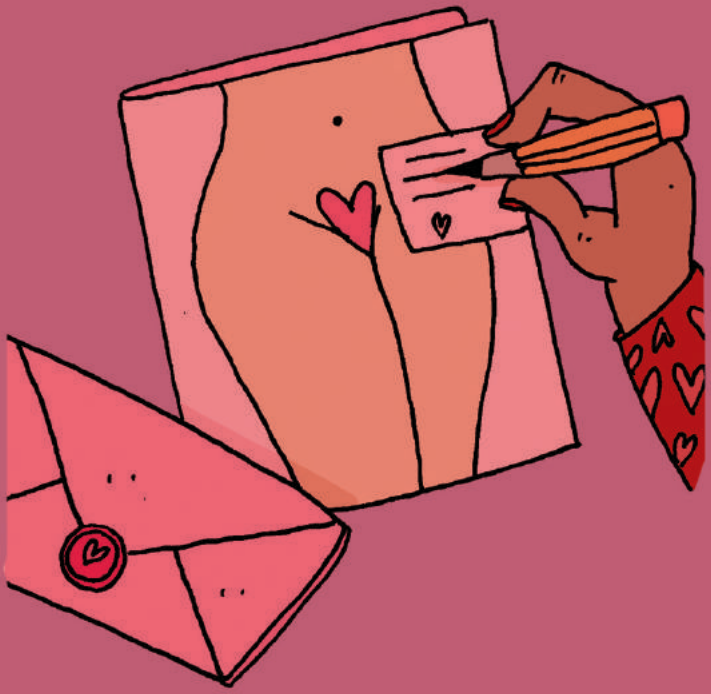






Share the news with a parent/carer or someone you trust and choose the period care that suits you best together.



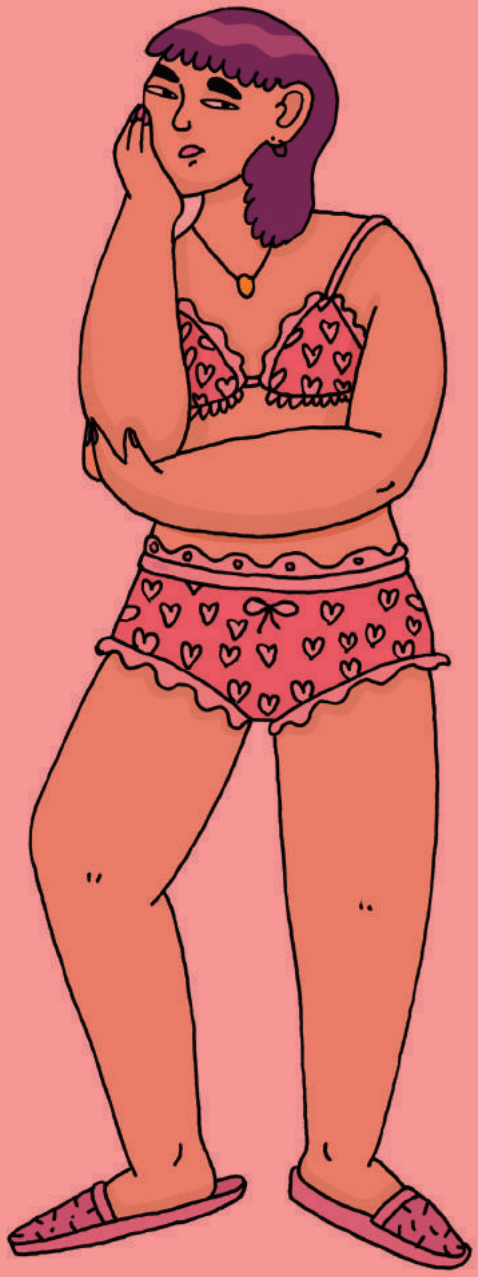


HAVE YOU HAD YOUR FIRST PERIOD? WRITE ABOUT IT HERE:

PERIOD PRODUCTS

There are lots of kinds of period products to choose from. Test the options and choose what makes you feel comfortable. How you manage your period, and the products you use, is completely up to you! Remember: not everyone has access to all types of period products, so it's important not to judge how someone manages their period.

Mission: Research when the first pad or tampon was created. Ask your mum, grandma, or other close relatives to tell you about what period care they used growing up.



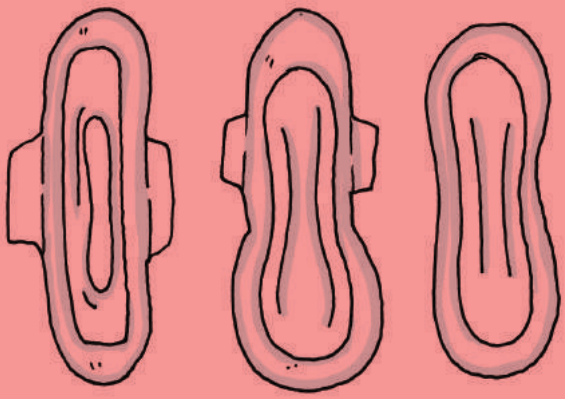
DISPOSABLE PERIOD PADS

Disposable pads are absorbent materials (made of cotton or synthetic fibres) that have a sticky backing to attach to the inside of your underwear. Pads absorb menstrual blood during your period. They come in different sizes and levels of absorbency for lighter or heavier periods, as well as for day or night use.





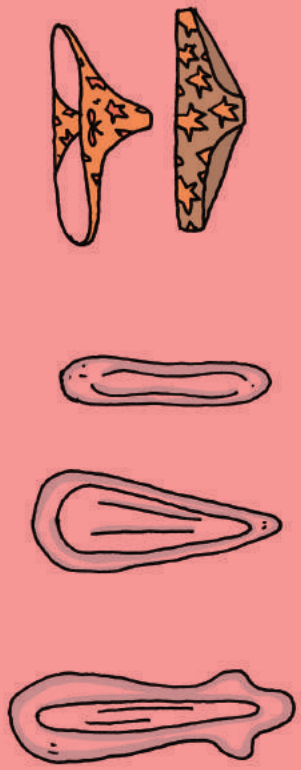
Change your pad every four hours or less.



Different types

- Normal, with wings/without wings (disposable pads)
- Ultra slim to super absorbent/maxi for different days of your period

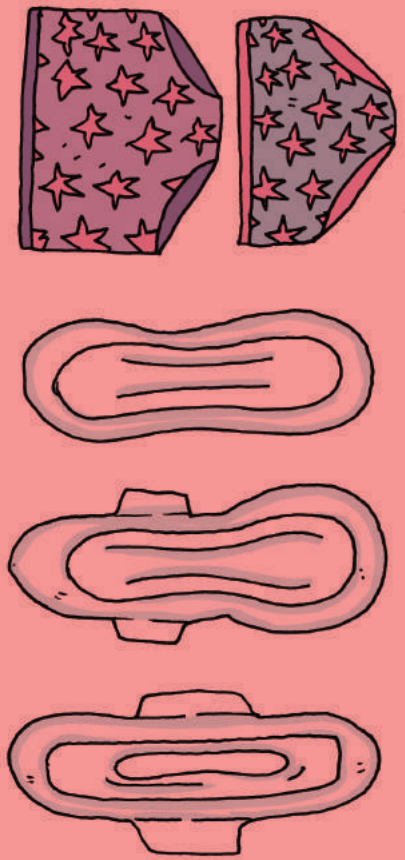
light
menstruation



average
menstruation



heavy
menstruation



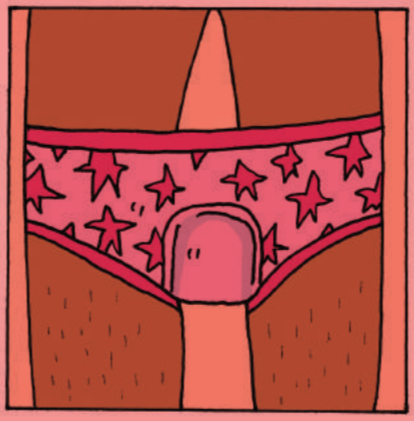
1.



2.



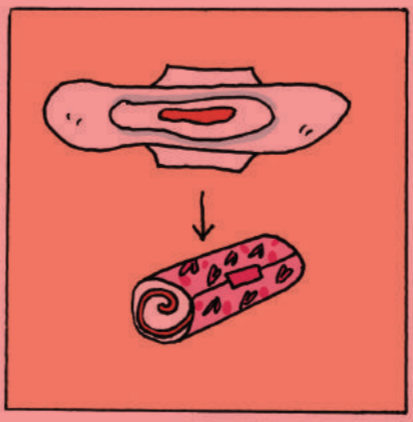
3.



4.



5.



6.





affordable



can't swim with them



easy to find



not environmentally–friendly (mostly made from plastics so they're not biodegradable)



easy to use



may be uncomfortable and can cause irritation

REUSABLE PERIOD PADS

Reusable period pads are cloth pads worn in your underwear to capture period blood just like disposable pads. They are made from various materials such as cotton, bamboo or microfleece, and they also come in different levels of absorbency. They tend to have snap fasteners to secure them around your underwear. You can buy them from lots of online retailers and there are even online tutorials on how to make your own. Depending on how heavy your flow is and the day of your period, change your pad every four hours or when it starts to feel full or wet and uncomfortable. When it comes to cleaning and caring for your pads, wash them with mild soap and water.





Different types:

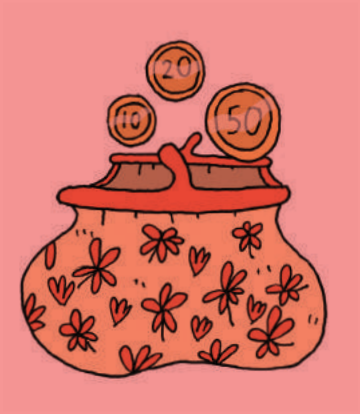
- They come in different sizes to accommodate different levels of flow.
- Some reusable pads are made up of two distinct parts: a pad base with wings and a removable absorbent insert.



natural fabrics so no exposure to plastic and eco-friendly



can be expensive initially



will save you money in the long run and you can make your own



you'll probably want to remember to carry a bag to keep used pads in when you're on the go

TAMPONS

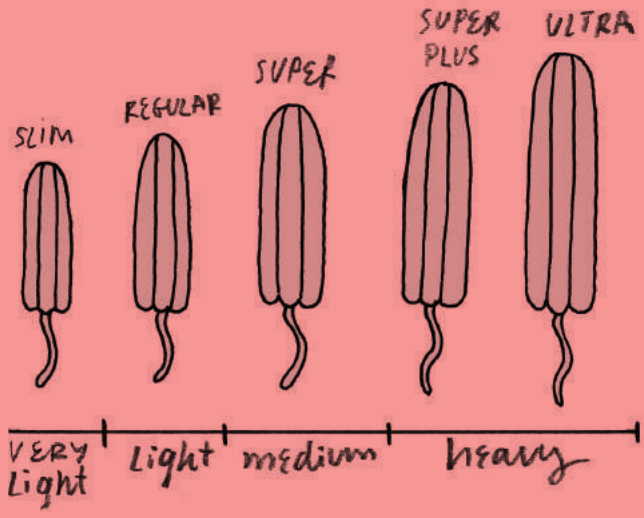
Unlike pads which absorb menstrual blood after it leaves the vagina, tampons absorb blood from inside the vaginal canal. Tampons are made of absorbent material (cotton or synthetic fibres like rayon) that is compressed into a small tubular shape. Each tampon has a string attached, that can be used to pull it out, and should be left hanging outside of the body. There are different sizes and levels of absorbency for lighter or heavier periods. Some tampons come with an applicator that helps you insert them with ease. Non-applicator or digital tampons are inserted using only your fingers. Most people find it easy to use a tampon but don't worry if you can't get the hang of them straight away, or if you find they're not for you. Tampons shouldn't be uncomfortable!



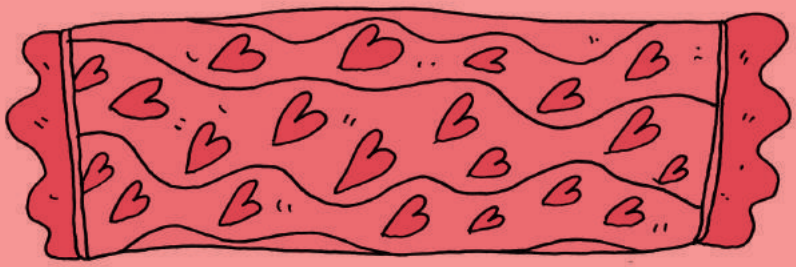


Change your tampon
every four to six hours.

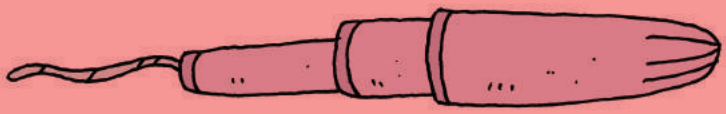
Different types



slim, regular, super, super plus, and ultra
for different flows and days of your period



package

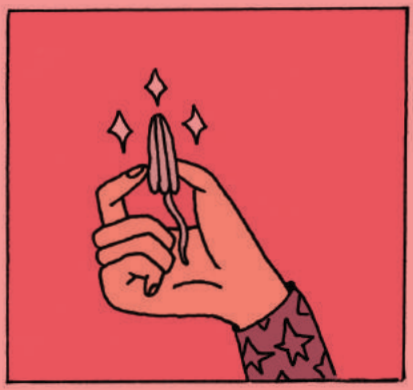


with an applicator



or without

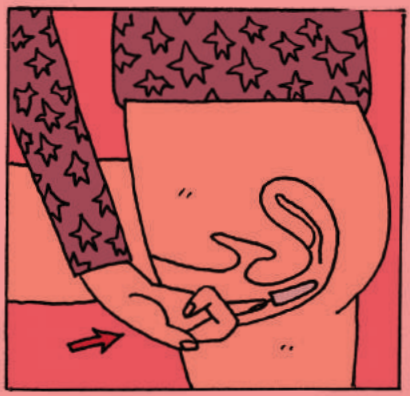
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2.



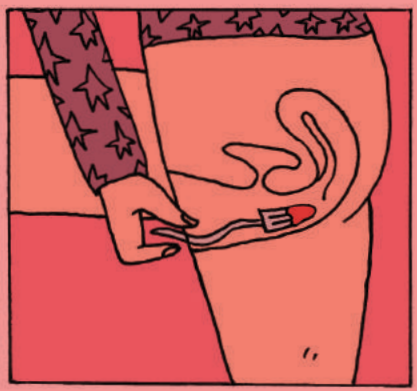
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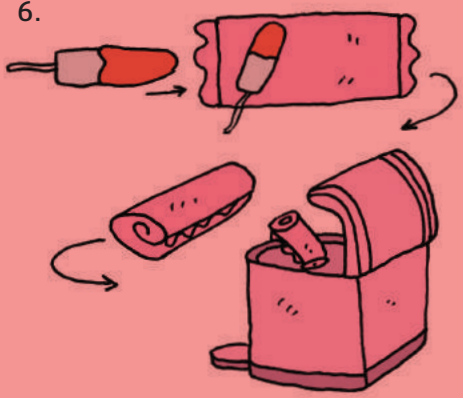
4.



5.



6.





discreet, suitable for sports
(you can swim with a tampon)



usually more
expensive



easy to find



most of them are not
environmentally-friendly
because they're made from
a plastic called rayon



some have applicators
for easier insertion



it's easy to forget you're
wearing a tampon, and may
cause a serious infection called
TSS if left in for too long

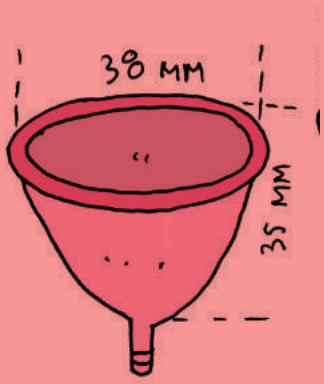
menstrual cups

Like tampons, the menstrual cup is inserted into the vagina. Instead of absorbing the blood, the cup collects it inside the vagina. The cup is made of soft flexible materials such as medical grade rubber or silicone, and it shouldn't feel uncomfortable to wear.

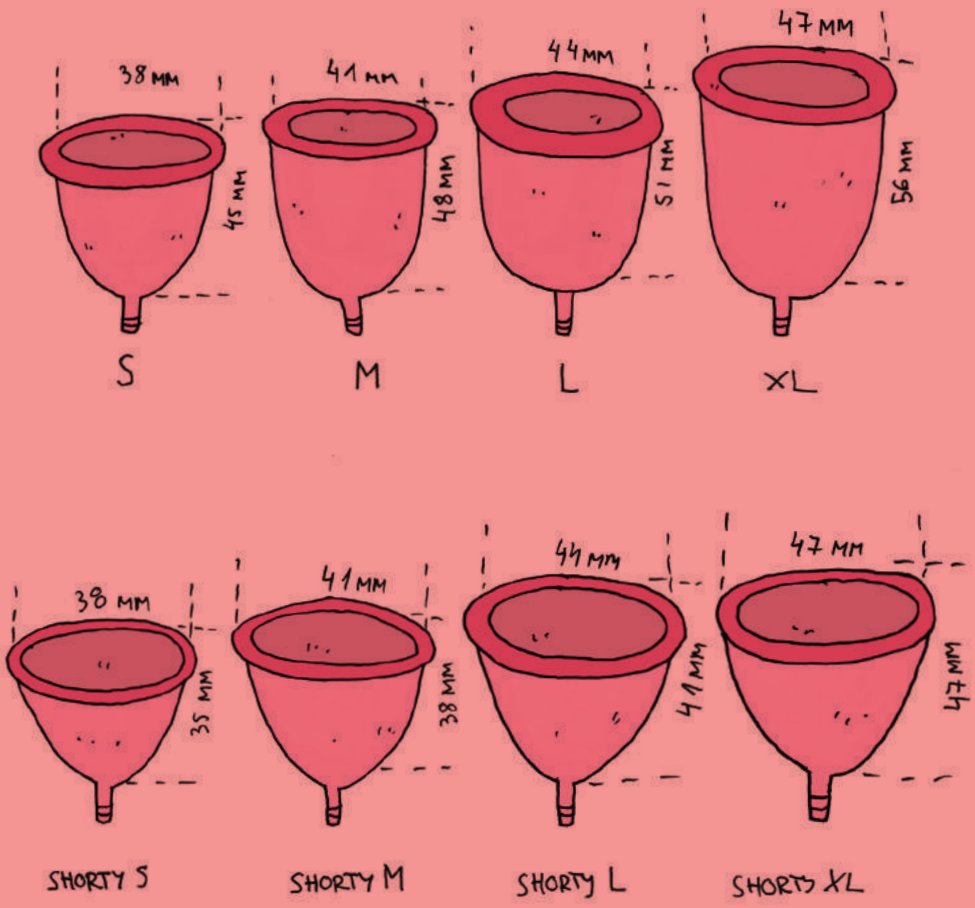




Empty the cup every ten to 16 hours, depending on how heavy your period is.



You can choose between different sizes, depths and materials.


38 MM
45 MM
41 MM
48 MM
44 MM
51 MM
47 MM
56 MM
S
M
L
XL
38 MM
35 MM
41 MM
38 MM
44 MM
41 MM
47 MM
47 MM
SHORTY S
SHORTY M
SHORTY L
SHORTY XL

Period Cup Washing Guide

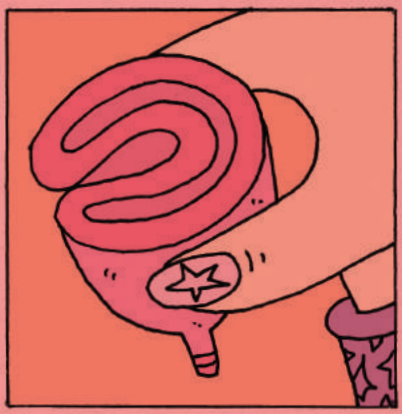
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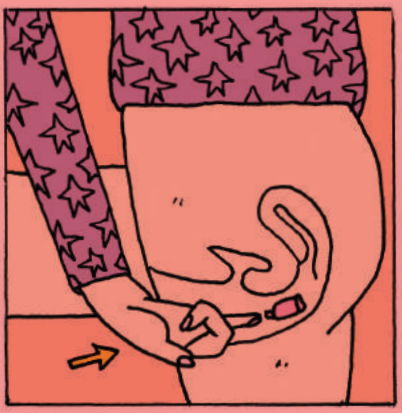
4.



5.



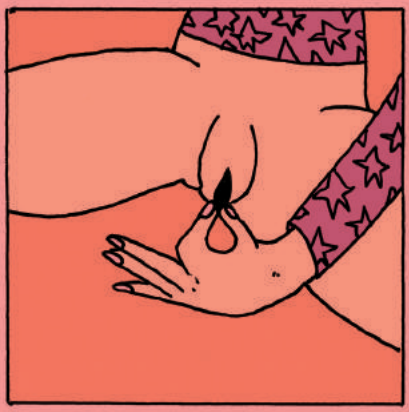
6.



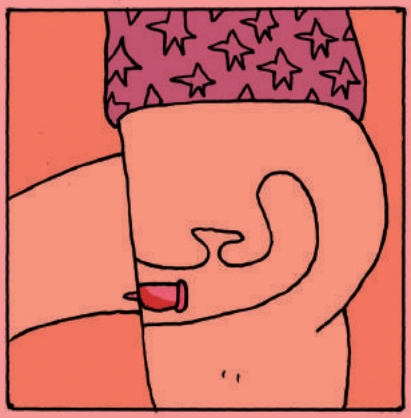
7.



8.



9.



10.



11.

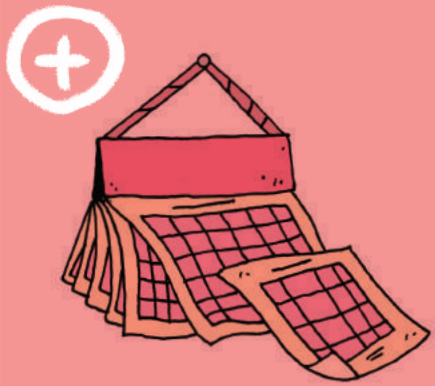


12.



Important: Make sure you check the specific instructions for safely sterilising your cup.





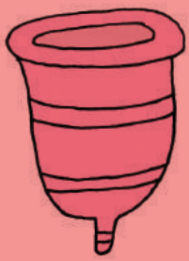
it can be used repeatedly
(up to several years)



expensive (initially)



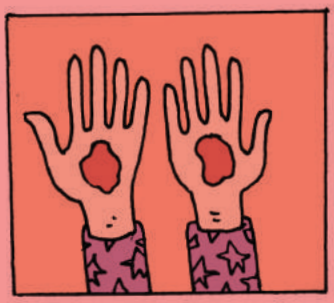
more environmentally-friendly
than disposable period
care options



it might get messy when
inserting or removing



doesn't cause irritation,
it's discrete and a good
investment



you need to have access
to a sink to empty
and wash it

Period Pants

Period underwear is designed to absorb menstrual blood, removing the need for pads or tampons. Although they are slightly thicker, they feel like normal underwear and should be washed straight after using.







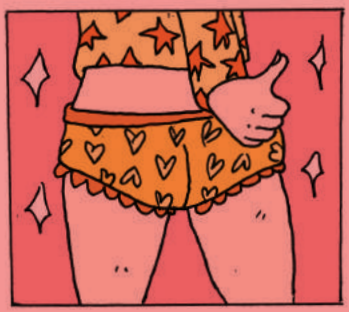
Change your period pants every 12 hours or less, if you're bleeding heavily. Track your cycle to know what works best!



reusable, comfortable, odourless



they are expensive (initially)



will save money in the long run



harder to find and you can't swim with them



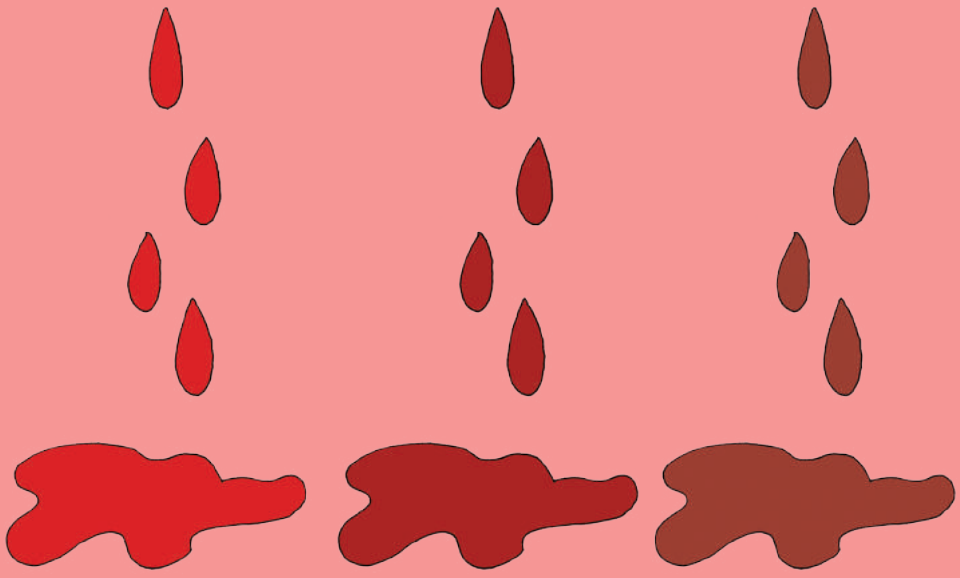
environmentally-friendly



if these are your main form of period care, you'll need multiple pairs

AM I REALLY BLEEDING?

It's important to remember that period blood isn't just made up of blood. It also contains tissue from your uterine lining that builds up and then sheds each month, as well as vaginal secretions. The blood can vary in colour from light red to deep red to dark brown (or even black!). If you're ever worried about the colour of your menstrual blood, visit your GP.



Bright red
(fresh blood)

Dark red
(morning blood)

Reddish-brown
(older blood)

How much do I bleed?

You generally bleed somewhere between 30 to 80 ml during a period, but it could be more or less. Everyone's flow is different.



On average, you will menstruate 400 times throughout your lifetime.

The Bloody Truth

Everyone's experience with their period is different. The majority of people can continue doing all the things they usually do while on their period, such as sports, travel or even have sex (if sexually active). However, for some, having a period can be very painful and disrupt their day-to-day lives. If you experience very severe period pain (so intense that you can't go about your day, study or hang out with friends) or other problems, it's important to speak to your GP.

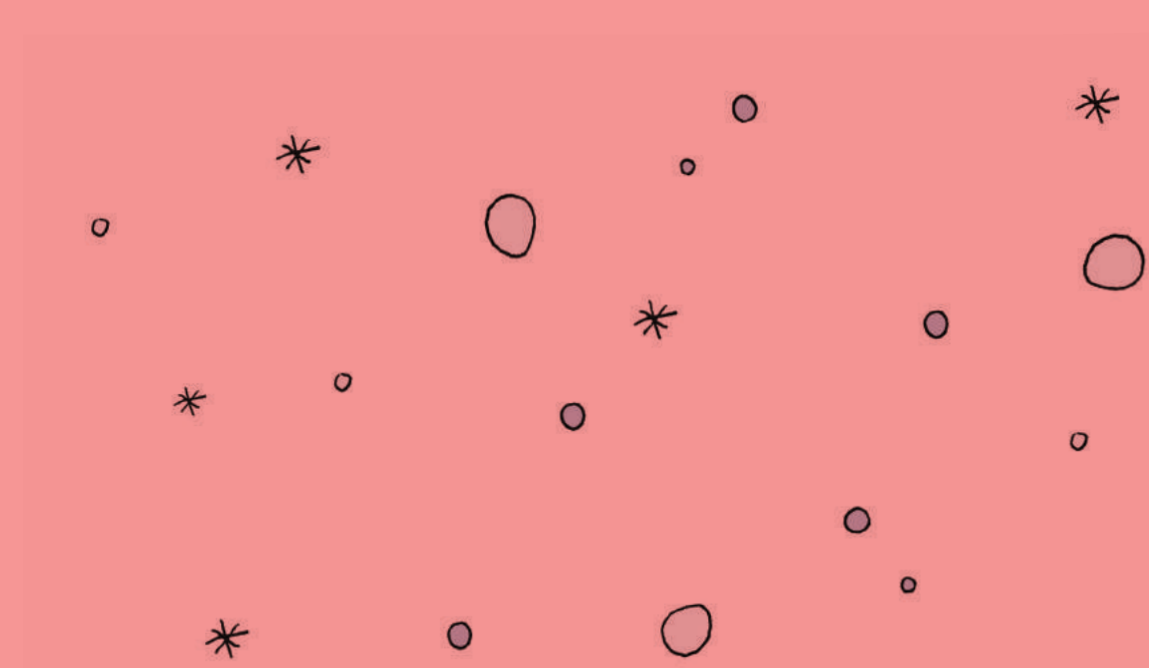


Start a monthly celebration to associate your period with something fun and enjoyable. Try out a new hobby, start watching a new TV series or read an interesting book, or make yourself a batch of cupcakes.



My celebration:

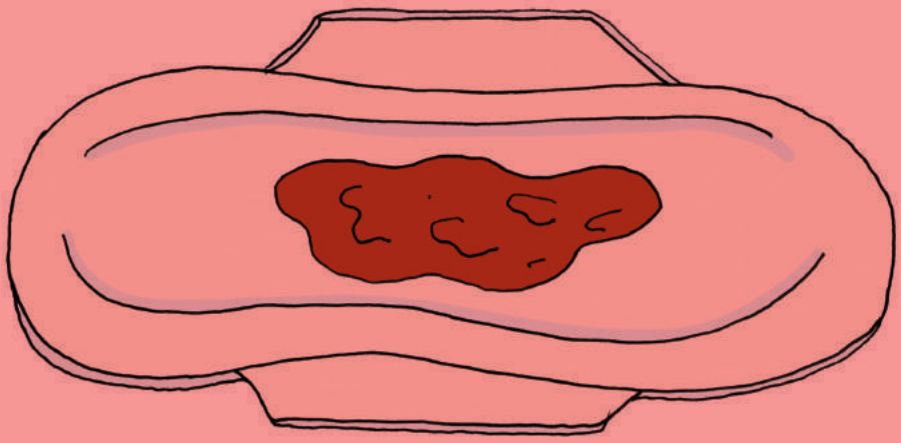




How to Remove Period Stains

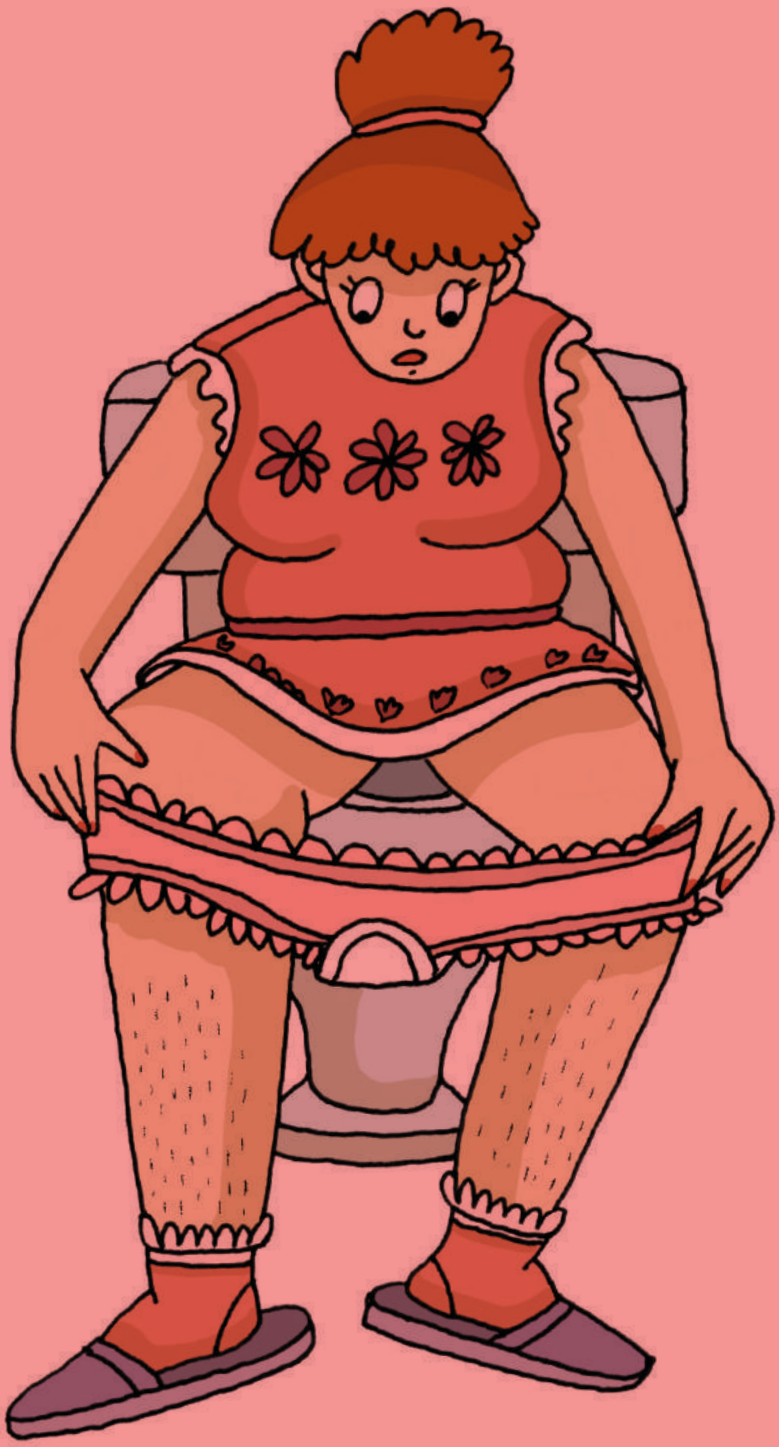
Wondering how to remove period blood stains from underwear, clothes or sheets? We've all been there! It's best to soak the items immediately in cold water with a little salt, before scrubbing to remove the stain. If it's an especially stubborn one, add detergent and keep scrubbing, or you can apply a stain remover and then put the item in the washing machine. We all get period leaks from time to time, so it's nothing to be embarrassed about.


SOAP



THERE'S SOMETHING JELLY-LIKE IN MY PANTS!

That sounds like a blood clot. There's nothing to fear. Blood clots can occur when your period blood flow is heavy and when substances called anticoagulants, that would otherwise break down the clots before leaving your body, simply can't handle the volume of blood produced. If the blood clot is larger than a 10p coin, or you are experiencing them very regularly, it is recommended that you see a doctor just to be on the safe side.



BUSTING POPULAR PERIOD MYTHS



You don't pee and menstruate from the same place! Pee comes out of the urethra, and period blood comes out of the vagina.



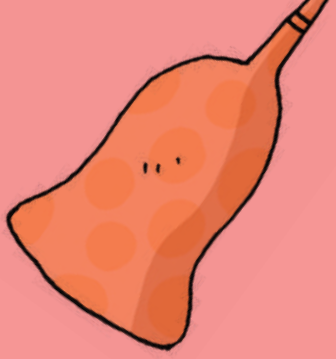


You can pee and poop as usual when using period products (even tampons).

Using a tampon or menstrual cup doesn't affect your virginity. *(Read more about virginity in Chapter 6)*.

You can use tampons or other products, even if you haven't had sex before. It's completely safe!





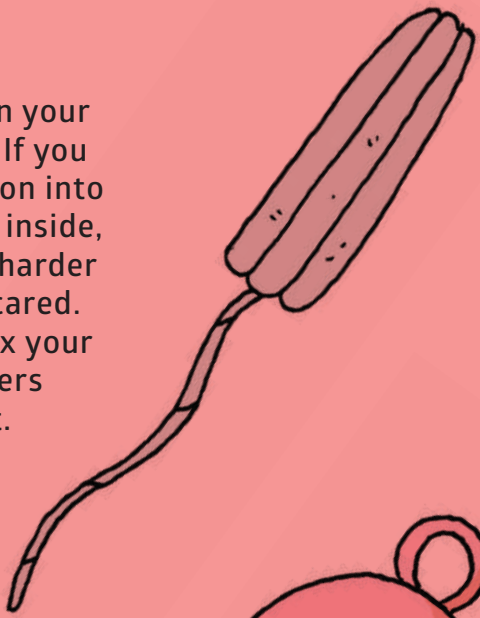
You can use tampons or a menstrual cup for your first period. It may seem a little scary at first, but don't worry, you'll get used to it.





You can swim or take a bath while wearing a tampon or menstrual cup.

Tampons cannot get lost in your body, or enter the uterus. If you accidentally insert a tampon into the vagina with the string inside, or it breaks off, it may be harder to pull out, but don't be scared. If this happens, try to relax your body, and insert your fingers deeper inside to remove it.







Mild or painful menstrual cramps (called 'dysmenorrhoea') occur because your uterine muscles contract to expel the uterine lining, which is shed during menstruation. You can try to ease mild cramps and pain with gentle exercise (if you're in the mood, and if you can exercise), more rest or a hot water bottle. You can take ibuprofen or paracetamol too, but always read the instructions carefully. Take your time to find out what makes *you* feel better during your period.



DIFFERENT BODIES, DIFFERENT PERIODS

Heavy menstrual bleeding can lead to iron deficiency and anaemia that can make you feel very tired. In such cases, it's a good idea to eat more foods that are rich in iron, such as leafy green vegetables, lentils, oranges, dark chocolate or nuts.

Conditions like premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), endometriosis and fibroids can make periods a lot more painful or heavy. If you experience very low moods, very painful cramps or very heavy periods, it's important to speak to your GP.





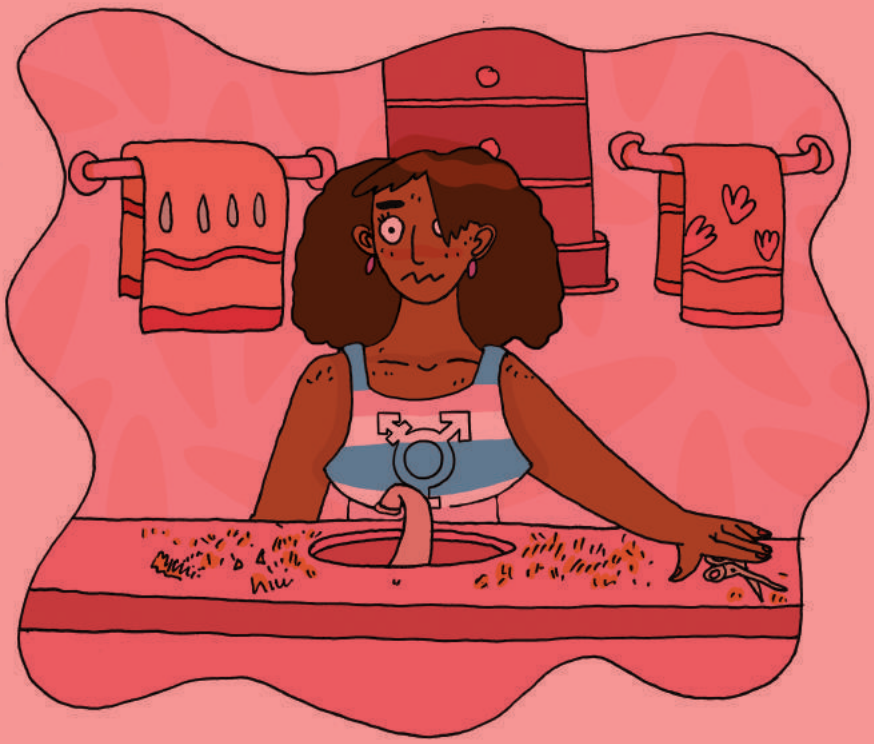
PSSSt...PMS?

A week or two before your period begins (in the luteal phase), your skin might break out, or you may feel tired, bloated, and have headaches or mood swings. These monthly symptoms are known as premenstrual syndrome, or PMS. Although not yet fully understood by doctors, it's mainly due to changes in hormone levels, especially progesterone. It's important to know that not everyone experiences these symptoms, or at least not every month. And when people do, they vary in intensity.

Some of the symptoms may include: bloating, period pain, headaches, breast tenderness, acne, constipation, changes in appetite, mood swings (you can get tired, tense, angry, sad).







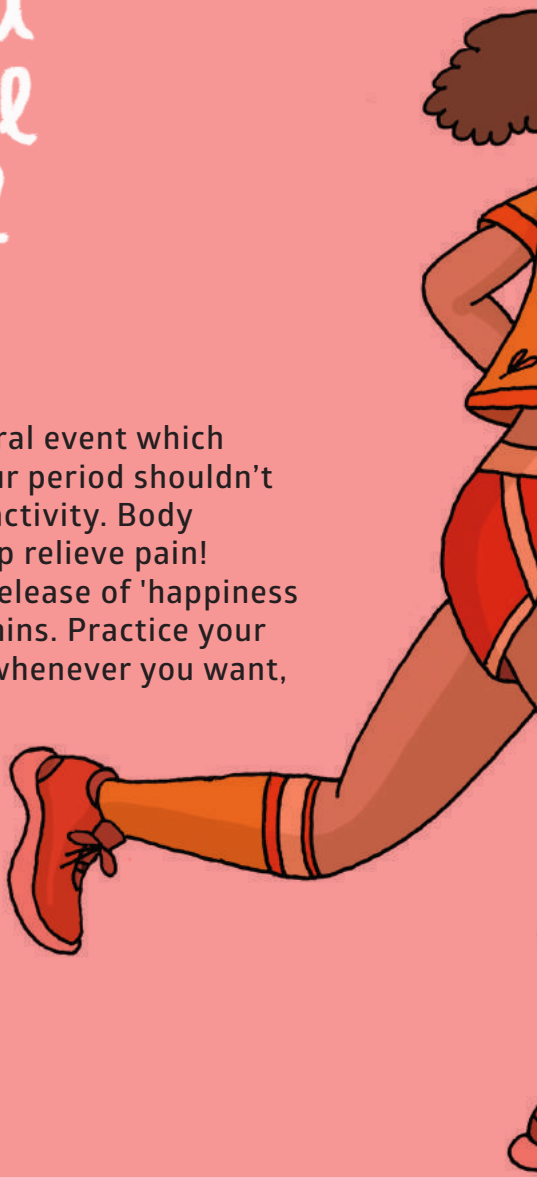


'ARE YOU ON YOUR PERIOD?'

Popular culture often presents PMS as the greatest evil. We hear comments or jokes that women become hysterical or emotional before their period. This leads to unhelpful attitudes which diminish the reality of how women are really feeling. So be careful not to make assumptions or negate other people's feelings! And most of all, remember that your emotions are valid.

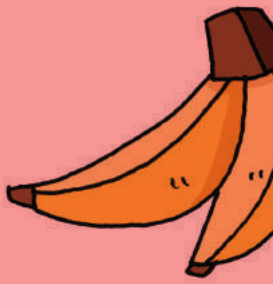
WHO SAID YOU CAN'T EXERCISE WHEN YOU'RE BLEEDING?

Periods are a regular, natural event which occurs every month, so your period shouldn't get in the way of physical activity. Body movement can actually help relieve pain! Exercise also triggers the release of 'happiness hormones' such as endorphins. Practice your favorite sport or exercise whenever you want, as long as it's not painful.





Foods to Feel Great





Some foods and activities can help you feel better during your menstrual cycle. Here are some ideas:



For the relief of mild pain during your period: yoga and light walks, a hot water bottle or electric blanket to keep you warm, foods with fatty acids such as fish, chamomile or mint tea, leafy green vegetables or nuts as a source of magnesium.



If you feel tired during your period, eat foods that are rich in iron such as dairy, eggs, lentils, spinach, dark chocolate, or sunflower seeds.

To elevate your mood, eat foods that are rich in vitamin D and calcium such as fish, cheese or orange juice.



Drink lots of water.

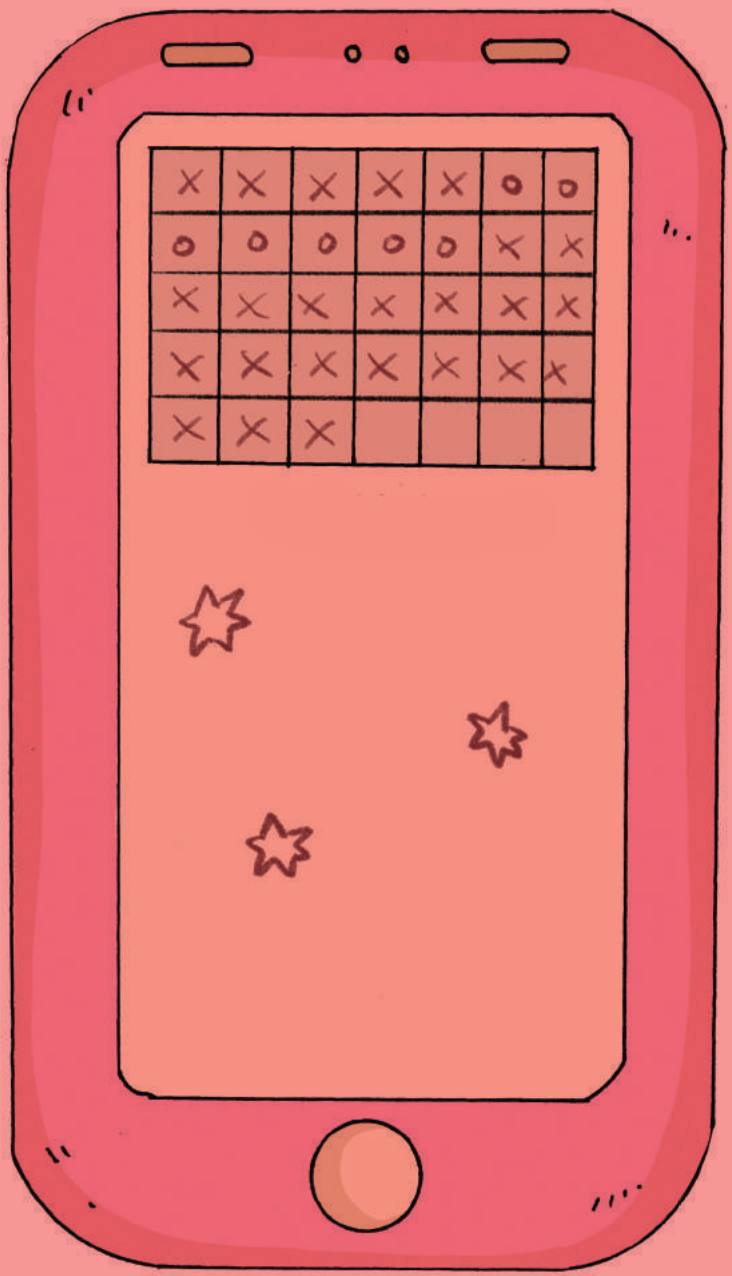
Eat foods rich in antioxidants and fibre such as fruits and fresh vegetables.

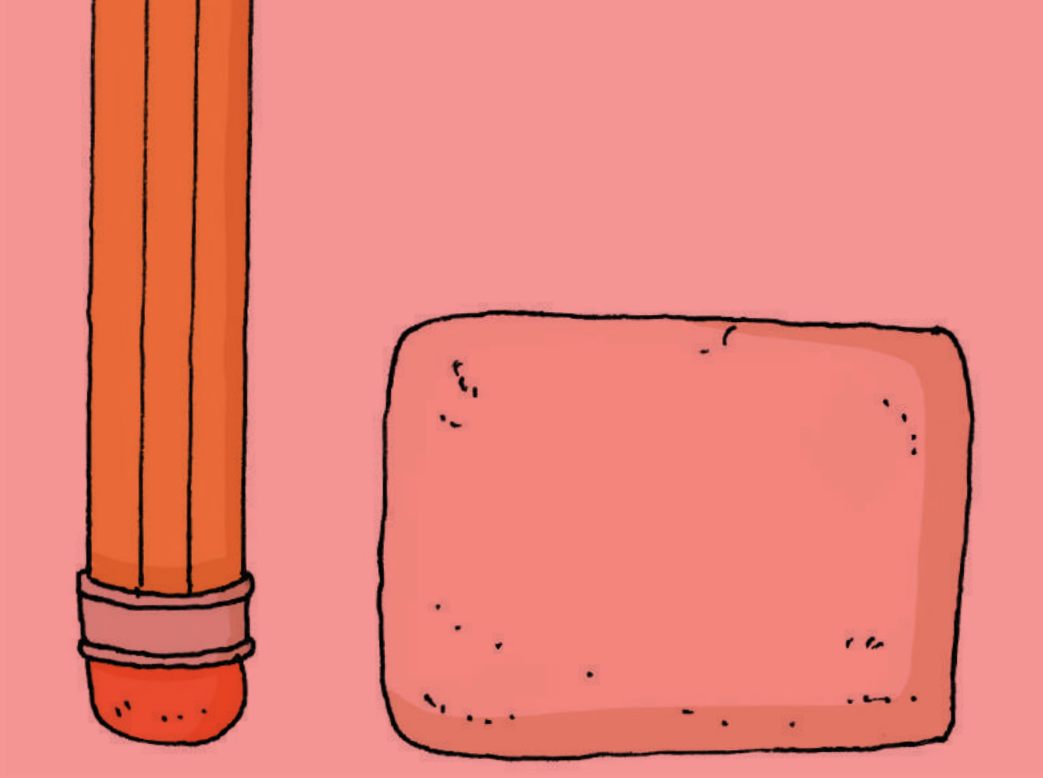

DARK

Period Calendar

Many people find it really useful to track and monitor their cycle by using a calendar or app. If you're using a calendar, simply mark the first day of your period and then add 28 days, the average cycle duration. This way you'll be able to approximately calculate the first day of your next cycle. For example, if you start bleeding on October 15th, your next cycle should start around November 12th. But the duration may vary—it can be more or less than 28 days. It's very helpful to get to know your cycle.

For the first several years after your first menstruation, your cycle is likely to be irregular, which is normal. It'll adjust over time and you'll be able to make more accurate predictions.





Start Keeping A Diary!

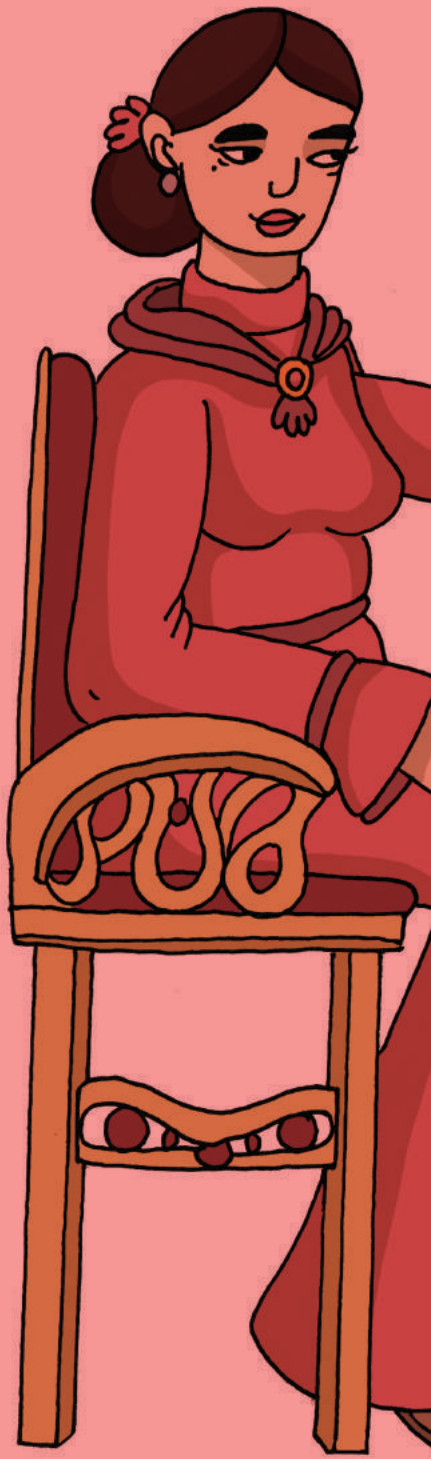
Everyone is different, so to better understand your body, especially around the time of your period, start recording your symptoms and how you feel. You'll begin to notice bodily changes and mood patterns.

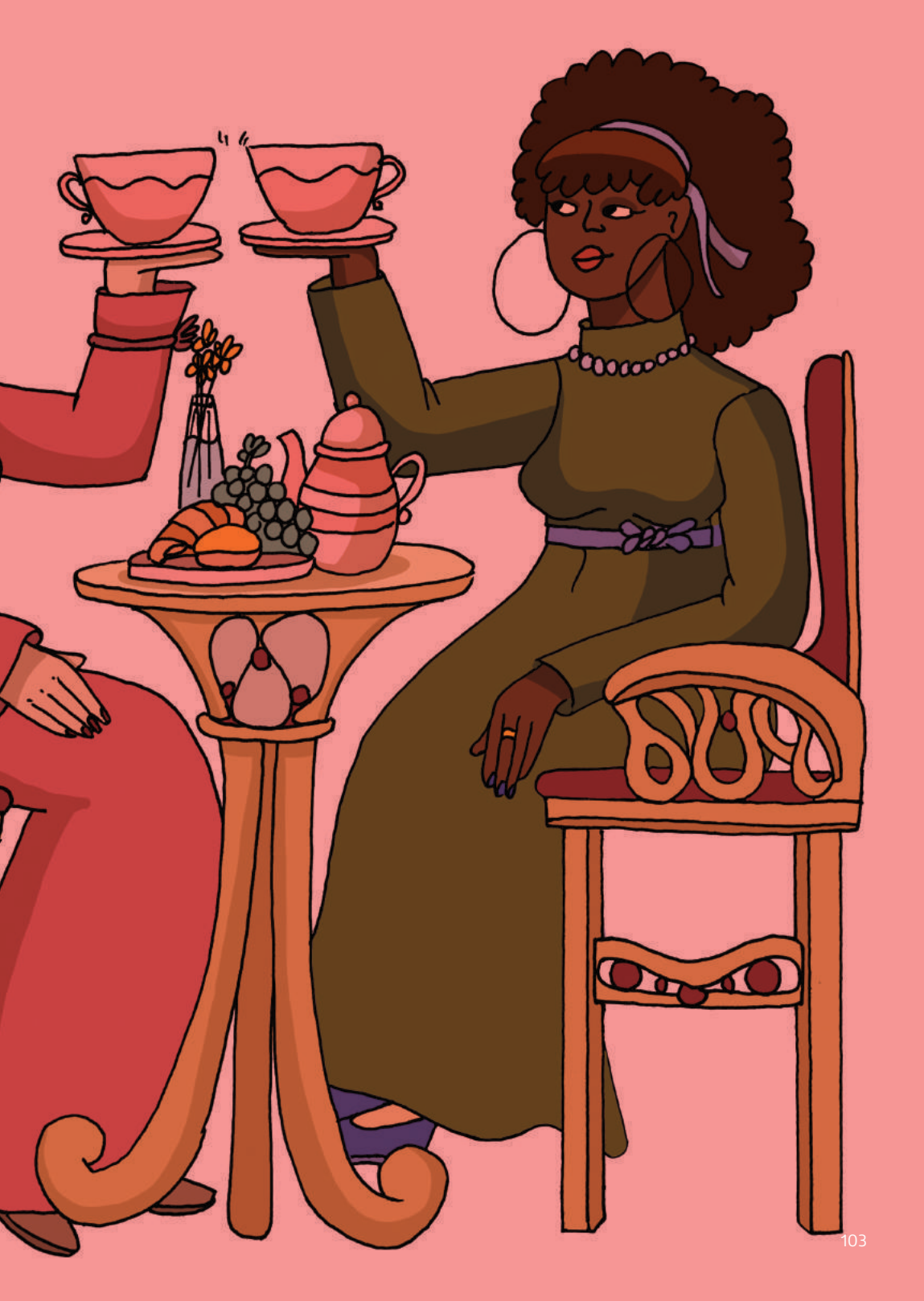
Mission: Get a period notebook or a tracking app on your phone.



Menopause

Menopause is part of the natural process of ageing. It occurs when you stop having periods and as a result you can no longer become pregnant. The average age is 51 years, but it can happen a lot sooner or later. Your period may stop suddenly or gradually, becoming less frequent over time. It results from a change in the balance of your hormones. This means that you might experience various symptoms such as hot flushes, night sweats, difficulty sleeping, low mood or anxiety, reduced libido, problems with memory and concentration. Every person experiences menopause differently, and at different ages.



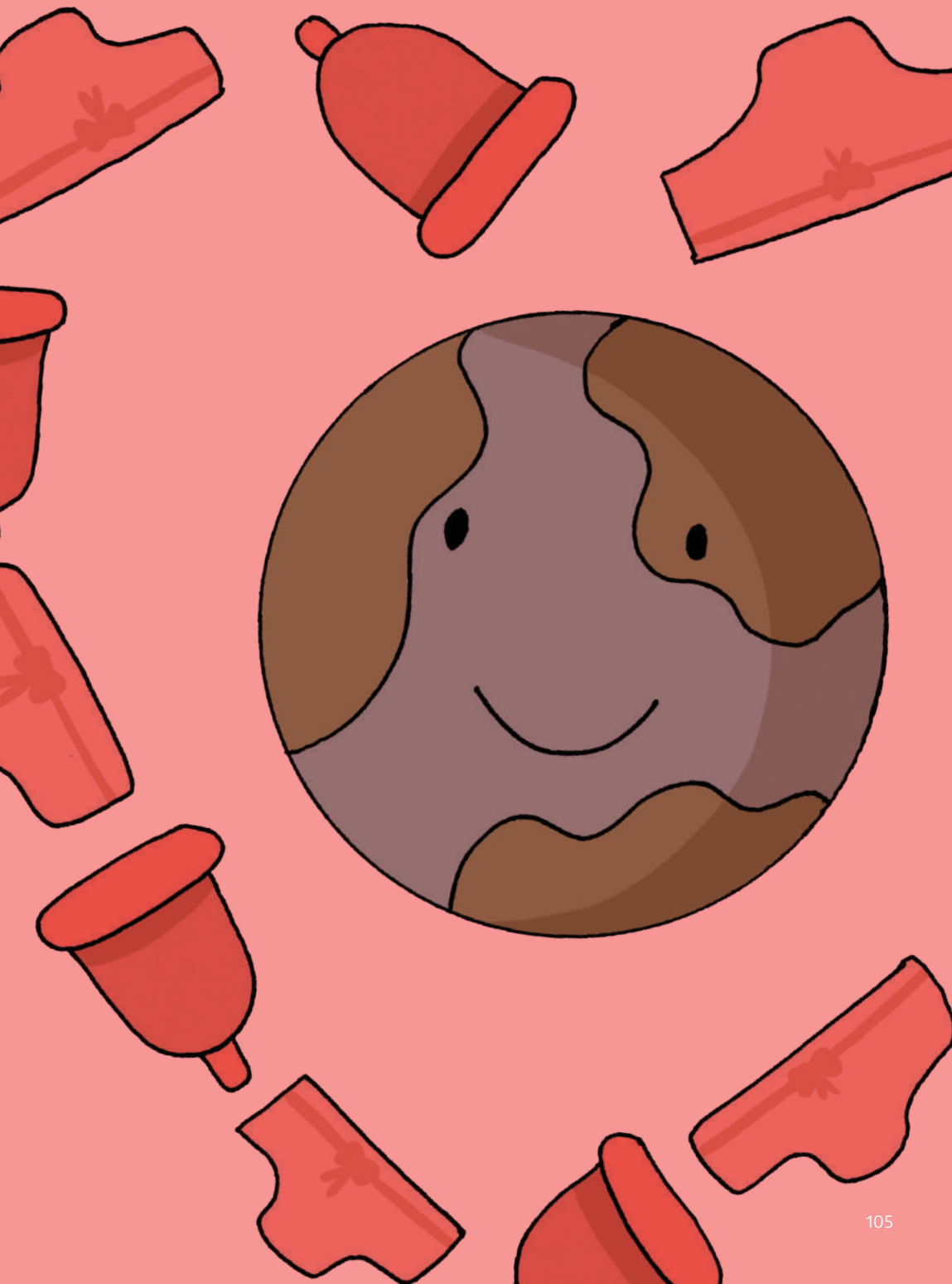


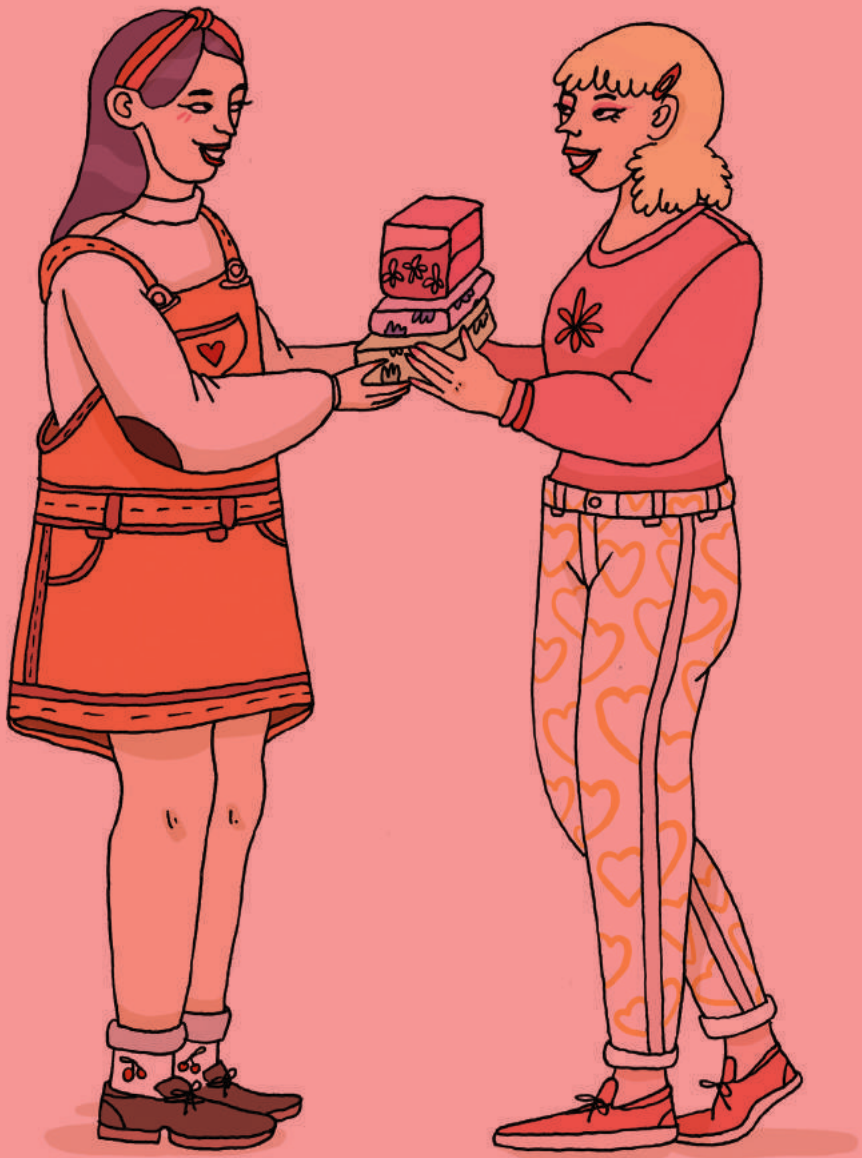
PERIOD WASTE

Period products may not be the biggest pollutants, but this doesn't mean that the production process doesn't have an environmental impact. Some period products are made of up to 90% plastic! Tampons are commonly made of cotton but often have a plastic or paper wrapper or applicator. Most of us will throw away between 10,000 and 15,000 pads and tampons in our lifetime, which is estimated to be about 150 kg of rubbish!



THERE ARE ALTERNATIVES SUCH AS MENSTRUAL CUPS, PERIOD PANTS AS WELL AS ECO-FRIENDLY PADS AND TAMPONS.





Period Poverty

Period poverty impacts millions of people around the world. Some of the reasons behind period poverty include period products being too expensive, sex ed not being informative enough, and the existing stigma around periods.

In the UK, many schools now provide free period care, but that doesn't solve the problem entirely. Young people have reported making their own pads from clothing or toilet paper, and others use nothing at all. This puts their health at risk and means that having a period each month is a real nightmare, often causing students to miss school.

Who's the most affected:

- children living in poverty
- refugees and asylum seekers
- people without a home
- prisoners

CELEBRATE WORLD MENSTRUAL HYGIENE DAY ON MAY 28TH!

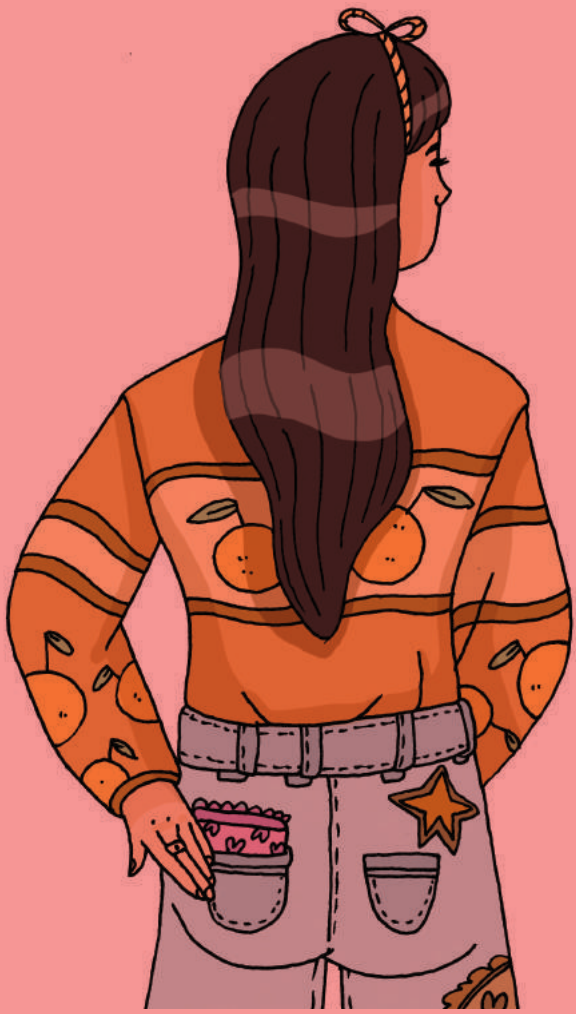


This day has been celebrated since 2014 and highlights the importance of good menstrual hygiene around the world. Poor menstrual hygiene, caused by lack of appropriate sex education, persisting taboos, limited access to period products and poor sanitation infrastructure, undermines the educatonal opportunities, health and overall social status of women and girls around the world, including the UK.

Start your own campaign or action on this day!
(See pages 112 and 113 for some ideas.)



PERIOD TABOOS



Even though half of the population menstruates, has menstruated or will menstruate every month, talking about tampons, pads and blood has historically been a taboo. Recently feminist activists, healthcare providers, international development organisations and charities have started to challenge this. We still have a long way to go but if we can all work together we can keep smashing the stigma!



Mission: The next time you go to the toilet to change your tampon or pad, don't feel like you need to hide them in your pocket or fist!

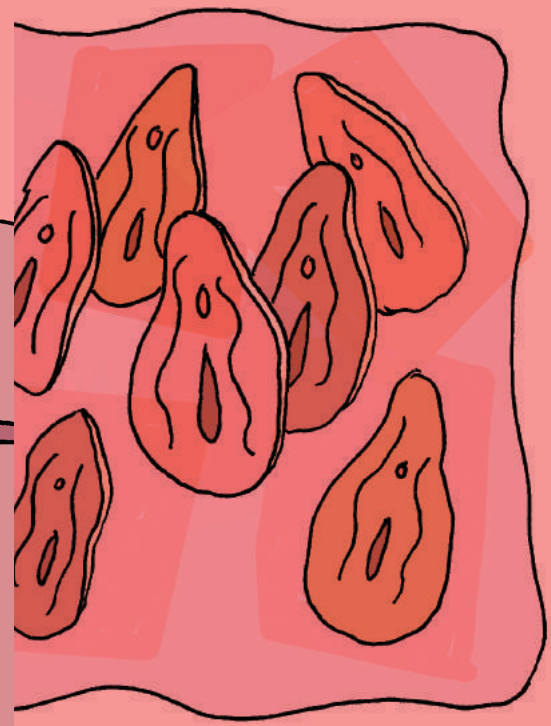
How to Be a Period Advocate



Invite an expert on the topic, such as a Brook ambassador, to give a talk at your school or university.



Organise an event to collect period products at your school or university and donate them to a period poverty charity such as Red Box Project or Bloody Good Period.



Create stickers or postcards with period positive messages and give them to your friends.



Don't leave boys and men out of the conversation. Research by UNICEF showed that educating boys about periods reduced period-related bullying and menstruation stigma in schools.

chapter 3

BODY IMAGE


LOVE

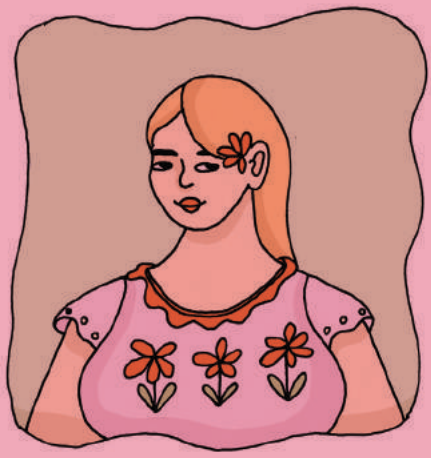
Representation Matters

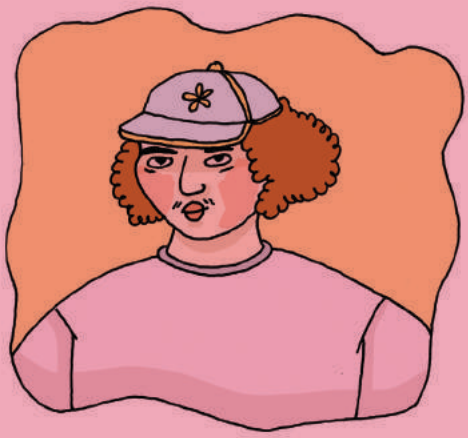
Buy a popular magazine, spend some time scrolling through social media or watching TV shows and ads. Grab a pencil and paper, and describe the images of women and girls you see. Then walk outside or sit on a bench in the park and describe the women and girls you see around you. Do you notice any differences? Is the representation in magazines, TV shows and ads realistic? Is anything missing?









For many decades, the media and advertising sector has contributed to creating a narrow (and unrealistic) standard of beauty, which doesn't reflect how diverse people are. This leads many young people to struggle with their body image and self-identity. We're all different in physical appearance—we vary in height, weight, size and skin tone. This is completely normal. In addition,

it's important to be aware that behind the images of people in ads or the media stands a whole production team that edits and alters models to seem thinner, with smoother skin, or without cellulite and stretch marks. Try not to compare yourself to other people or airbrushed pictures. The truth is there's no beauty standard!



CHALLENGE DAMAGING MESSAGES

We are bombarded with sexualised images in advertising and the media, so much that we no longer even notice them. It's normal and healthy to be sexual, but sexualisation occurs when individuals are treated as sex objects, and evaluated only in terms of their physical characteristics and perceived sexiness. Women and girls are more likely to be sexualised in media outlets than men and boys. Putting so much pressure on physical appearance can lead to **eating disorders, low self-esteem and depression.**

START A CONVERSATION WITH YOUR FRIENDS AND CLASSMATES.



OUR BODIES ARE BEAUTIFUL

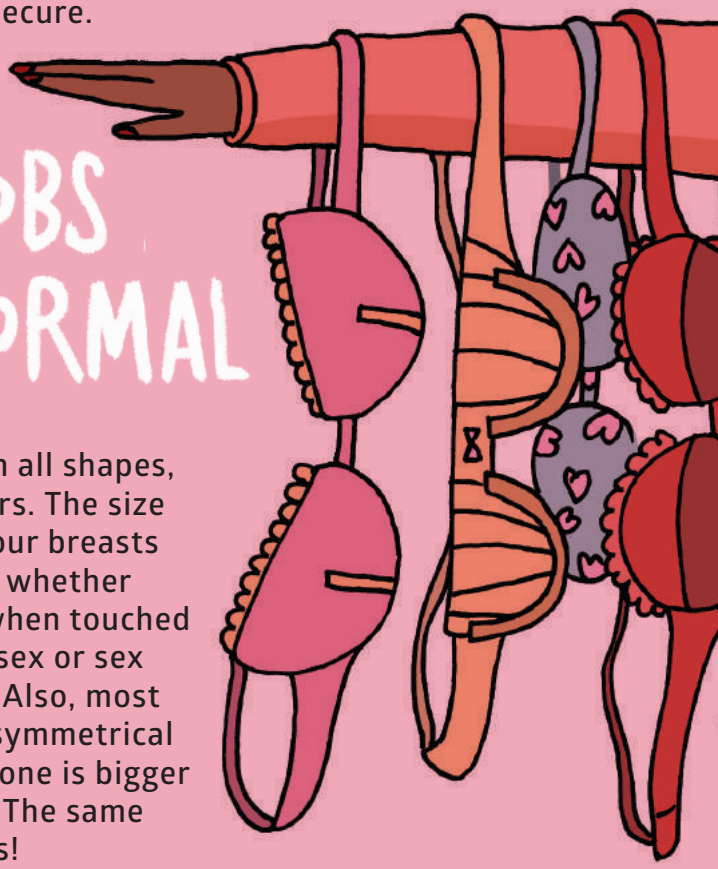
Have you ever wanted to change something about your body? You're definitely not alone. Many of us grow up not liking our bodies because of the unrealistic beauty standards we see in magazines, on social media and in consumer brands. It often seems that there is no way to measure up to this impossible ideal we see around us. The *truth* is there is no 'right' way to look! The images that you see on TV and social media don't accurately reflect most people's realities, so try not to compare yourself to them and don't forget to tell yourself:

I'M BEAUTIFUL!





During puberty, your breasts will likely begin to grow. Also, you may experience tenderness or swelling before your period. So pick out a comfortable bra or choose not to wear one if you feel better without it. There are lots of different styles to choose from and many shops will offer a bra fitting service for free. Some people find that sports bras or bralettes are more comfy and practical than bras with cups or underwires. Whatever you choose, it's all about feeling comfortable, confident and secure.



ALL BOOBS ARE NORMAL

Breasts come in all shapes, sizes and colours. The size and shape of your breasts does not affect whether they feel nice when touched as part of solo sex or sex with a partner. Also, most breasts aren't symmetrical and very often one is bigger than the other. The same goes for nipples!


I
my
boobs



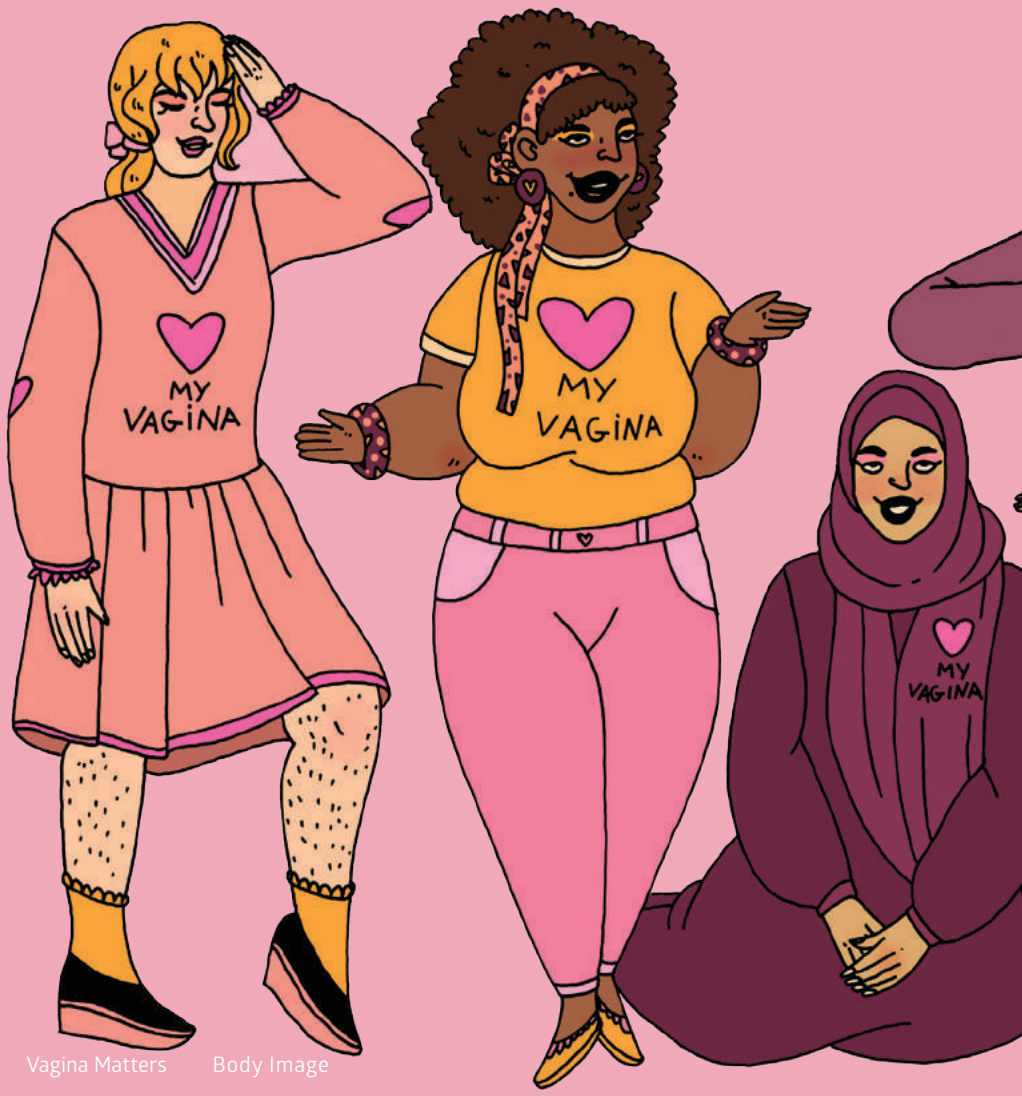
V- OR THAT WHICH SHOULD NOT BE NAMED

People have long used euphemisms (words or phrases that avoid direct naming) for genitals. Often this starts at home when we are taught about our bodies. Some of these words are related to food, animals, or resemble baby sounds, while others... are just VERY weird and confusing! Still, some are downright offensive. We often use these substitutes because we feel uncomfortable saying the real thing—*vagina* or *vulva*, which are great words. The fact that we don't feel comfortable talking about the female anatomy and its functions is worrying. This discomfort leaves us unprepared to talk freely about our bodies.



SAY it OUt LOUD:
VULVA!

Learning to accept our bodies can be a constant struggle, and it's normal if you have days where you don't like your body. Try to be kind to yourself and treat your body with love. It's useful to think about it in terms of what your body can achieve, not what it looks like.



Try to celebrate all the amazing things it can do! Loving yourself and listening to your body is the greatest strength and shield against the judgement of others.



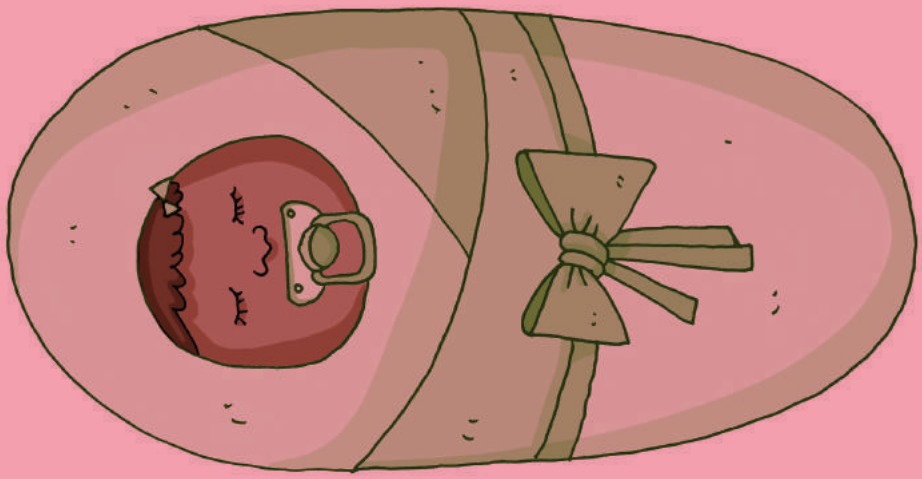
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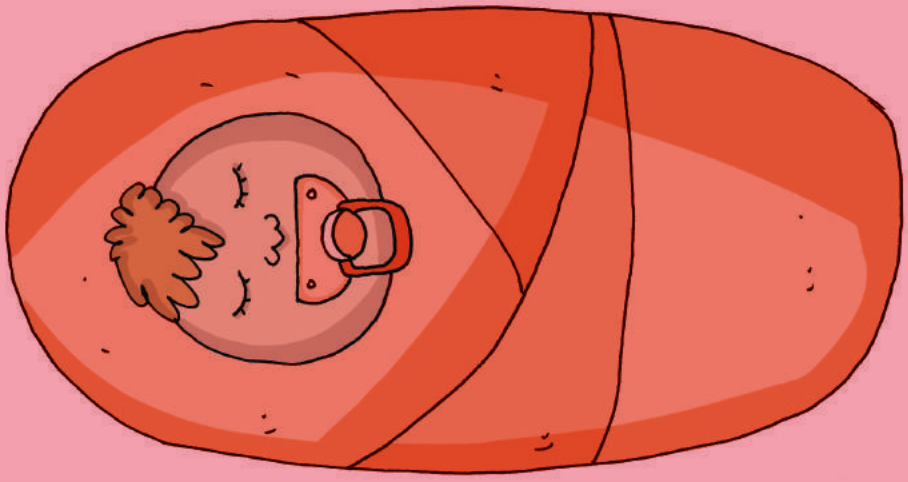
SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY



Understanding Gender

At birth, depending on whether the baby has a vagina or a penis (biological sex), they will be labelled a girl or a boy. From this moment on, they will be treated a certain way depending on their biological sex. For example boys and girls are dressed in different clothes and given different toys to play with. Many people consider this to be very important, even though there is no valid reason to treat boys and girls differently. It is assumed that boys will grow up to be men, and girls will grow up to be women, but it's important to understand that gender isn't as simple as this.





Biological sex is determined by the sex chromosomes, X and Y. XX determines the female sex, and XY determines the male sex. At birth, your doctor assigns your gender based on your internal and external genitals (primary sex characteristics).

Gender identity is how a person understands their own gender (as a boy, a girl, as a combination of the two, or as neither). It can change over time and it may or may not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth.

Gender expression is the way a person chooses to express their gender. This may include behavior, appearance or personal style, such as clothing, hairstyles, and mannerisms. These may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine.

WHAT DOES LGBTQIA STAND FOR?

LGBTQIA is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual. It depicts a broad spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities. However, keep in mind that the language used is constantly evolving.

Gender is a spectrum, and you shouldn't assume someone's gender based on their physical appearance.

Cisgender (Cis): a person who identifies as the gender they were assigned at birth.



Intersex: a general term used for a variety of situations in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male.

Non-binary: a person whose gender does not fit into the gender binary (e.g. they don't identify exclusively as male or female).

Transgender man: a person who was assigned female at birth but who identifies as a man.

Transgender woman: a person who was assigned male at birth but who identifies as a woman.



WHAT IS SEXUAL ORIENTATION?

Sexual orientation refers to the sex or gender that someone is sexually, romantically, or emotionally attracted to. The term also encompasses sexual identity, attraction, and behaviour. It's about how *you* perceive yourself but this may change over time and in different contexts. Some people are aware of their preferences from a young age, while for others it may be a process of self-discovery that continues for years or throughout their whole life. Remember, whoever you're attracted to, it's normal and nothing to be ashamed of.





Asexual – a person who experiences limited or no sexual attraction, interest or desire.

Bisexual – a person who is attracted to more than one gender.

Heterosexual (straight) – a person who is romantically or sexually attracted to someone of a different gender, typically a man who is attracted to women or a woman who is attracted to men.

Homosexual (gay) – a person who is almost exclusively attracted to people of the same gender. Homosexual women are often called lesbians, while men and women can both be called gay.



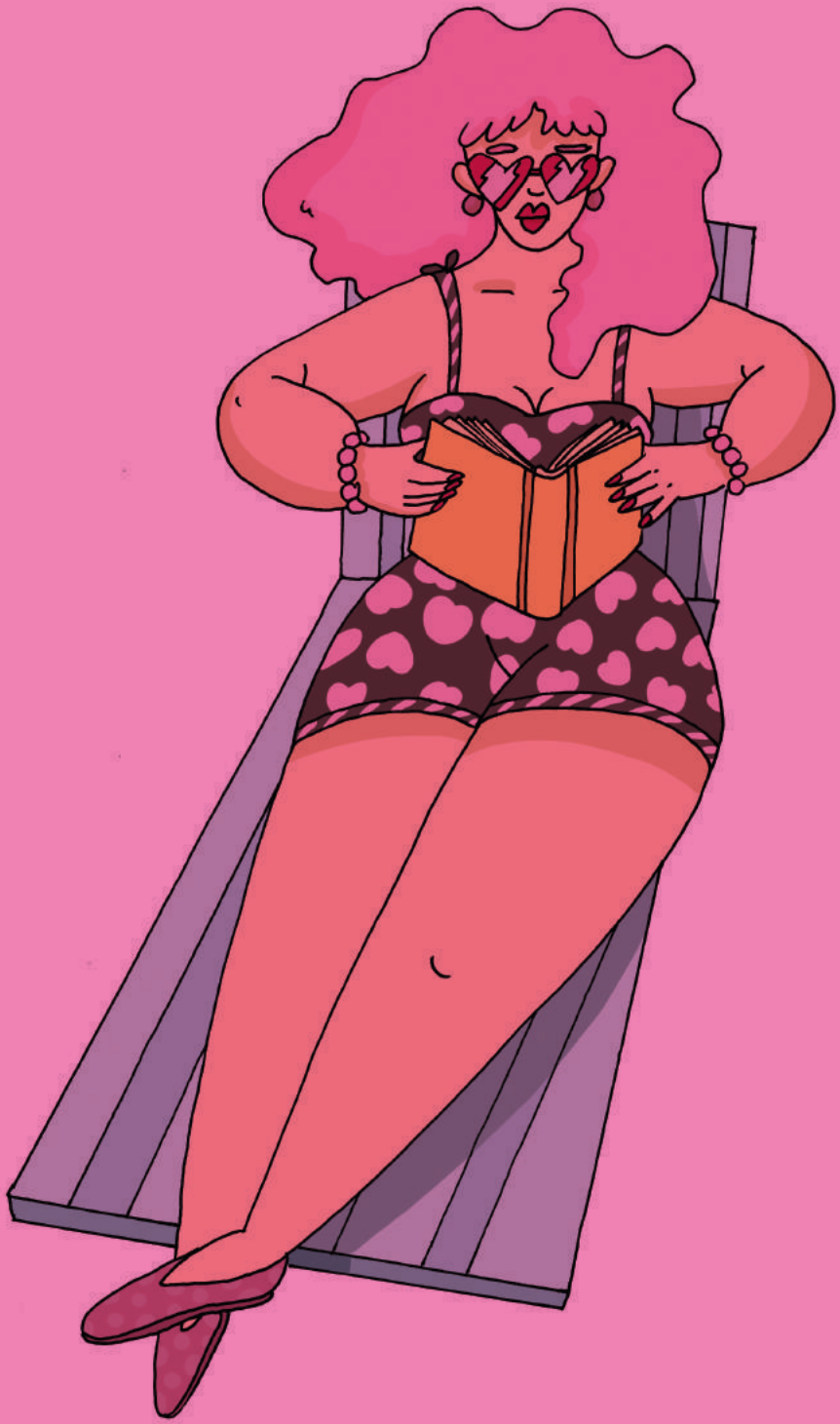


Pansexual – a person who is emotionally, sexually, and/or physically attracted to others regardless of gender identity.

Queer – an umbrella term used by some to describe members of the LGBTQIA community. It was originally used as an insult but has been reclaimed by the queer community though some may not wish to use it due to its history.

chapter 5

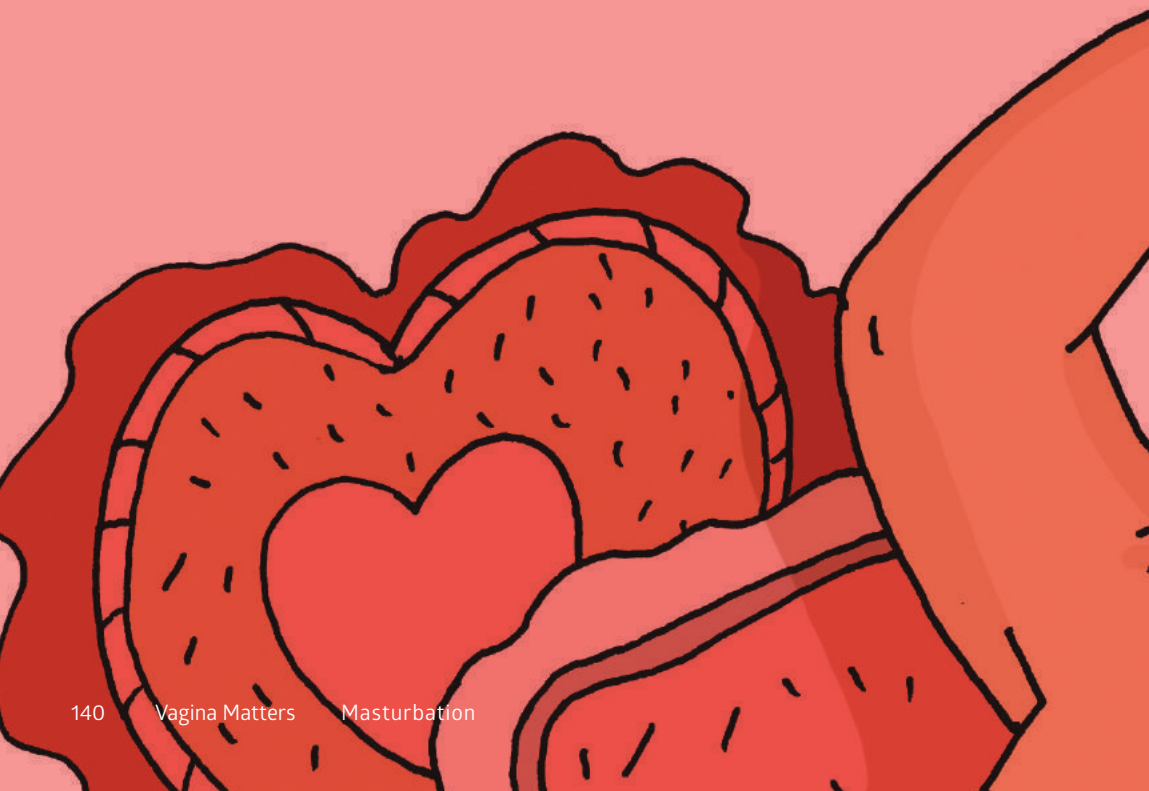
MASTURBATION



At the beginning of puberty, you might begin to experience sexual desires and curiosity about your own body. Masturbation (self-pleasure) means touching your own genitals for sexual stimulation. It's completely normal.

So WHAT'S A CLITORIS?

The clitoris is a genital organ that exists solely for pleasure! It has over 8,000 nerve endings, more than any other part of your body and twice as many as on the head of the penis. It's located at the upper junction of the labia.



THE CLITORIS IS THE MOST SENSITIVE PART OF THE HUMAN BODY.



Anatomy of the clitoris

It wasn't until fairly recently that scientists discovered the true size and anatomy of the clitoris. What you see is only the tip of the iceberg! The clitoris is only partially visible, with three quarters of it remaining hidden and extending up to 10 cm around the vagina. The size of the glans clitoris may vary from 2 mm to 4.5 cm. Also, the clitoris continues to grow almost throughout your entire lifetime, at 30 it's nearly four times the size it was during puberty!

Interesting fact

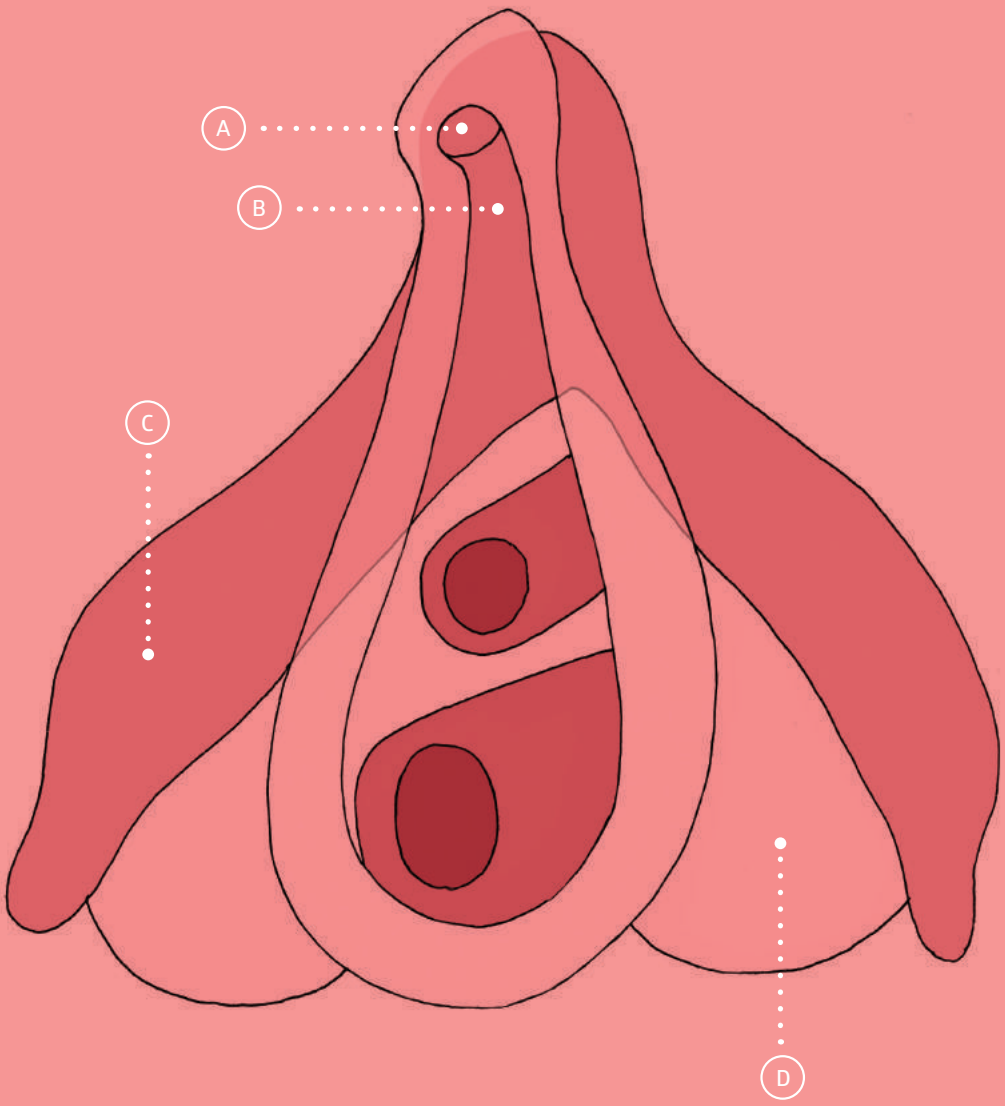
Did you know that male and female sex organs develop from the same tissue? About 12 weeks after the onset of pregnancy, the genitals begin to form into a penis or vulva. Although it's not the same shape, the anatomy of the clitoris is similar to that of the penis. The clitoris also erects, hardens and swells up when aroused.

A. **Glans clitoris**

B. **Clitoris body**

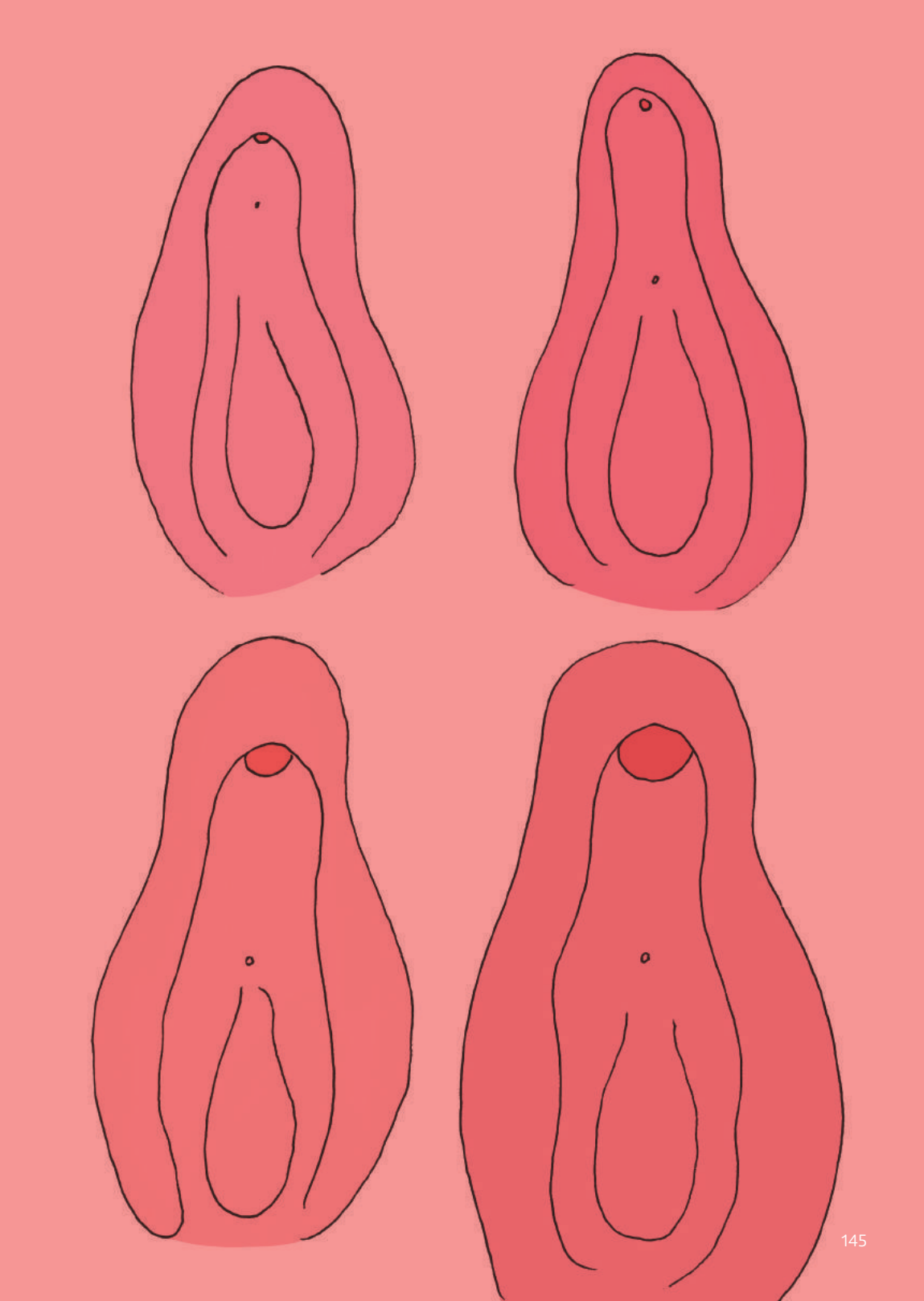
C. **Crura**

D. **Vestibular bulbs**



DIFFERENT PEOPLE, DIFFERENT CLITS

Like everything else in our bodies, everyone's clitoral glans, the external part of the clitoris, is different in size and shape. Some are entirely hidden under the clitoral hood, while others stick out. Some are very sensitive and others less so. When masturbating or having sex, some people prefer direct stimulation to the clitoris, while others prefer to stimulate the area around the glans. Don't be afraid to find out what works for you and what doesn't.



ORGASM (SEXUAL CLIMAX)

An orgasm is the body's natural response to intense pleasure and arousal during masturbation or other sexual activity. At first, all muscles tighten, your heart rate rises, and you might make sounds out of pleasure. Did you know that some women also ejaculate? This is when fluid flows or squirts from the urethra (but it's not pee!). You may not orgasm every time you have sex (which is OK). It's important to get to know your body and what you like, as this will help you experience sexual pleasure more when you're with a partner or alone.



These are the most common types of stimulation that can lead to an orgasm:

Clitoral stimulation: Stimulation of the clitoris is perhaps the most common way for most women to orgasm. This is done, for example, by massaging it with a finger, a sex toy, or oral stimulation (with the tongue).

Vaginal stimulation: This type of stimulation requires penetration of the vagina by a penis, fingers, tongue or sex toys. Some people don't ever reach orgasm this way, and that's totally normal. You may have heard of something called the G-spot (a cluster of nerve endings located inside the vagina) which could be the reason why vaginal stimulation can feel good, but experts are still learning about how this works.

Everyone experiences sexual pleasure in different ways, and that's OK. Listen to your own body and find out how you like to to be stimulated.



I can't orgasm! What should I do?

Don't worry, it happens! There's nothing to be worried or ashamed about. Sometimes reaching an orgasm is a matter of relaxing and focusing on the moment without worrying about how you look, or whether you are doing it right. You may be stressed or you may not feel comfortable—in which case you should stop, sex is meant to be fun! There are many factors, so the more you explore your own body, the better you will feel.

It can take time to learn what you enjoy and what your body responds to. Finding out how you orgasm can be fun, and sex without orgasming should still be enjoyable.

Also, sex is not meant to be painful! Arousal (the desire for sex) is an important aspect, as it prepares your body. When aroused, you may notice changes in your body: your heart rate increases, your nipples may harden, the clitoris and labia swell up, and the vagina can become 'wet'.

DID YOU KNOW...?

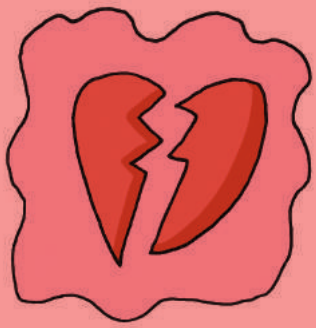
that 50–75% of women say they need clitoral stimulation to orgasm? Before having sex, it's always a good idea to discuss with your partner what's pleasurable and what's not, to make sure you're on the same page.

WHAT'S MASTURBATION?

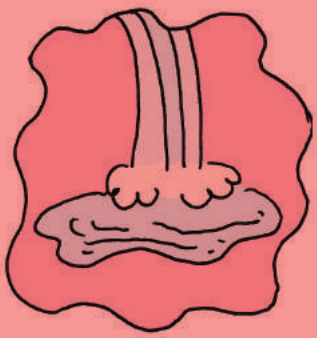
Masturbation is one of the easiest and safest types of sex. It allows you to get to know your body and learn what you like and what you don't—and there is no risk of getting pregnant or getting a sexually transmitted infection! No matter what you hear, remember that there is nothing shameful or unhealthy about masturbation.

Almost everyone masturbates. But although practicing self-pleasure is completely natural and healthy, it can still be considered taboo for women to masturbate. We've made a list of all the MYTHS we've heard about masturbation. On the next pages you'll read about some of the most common ones.

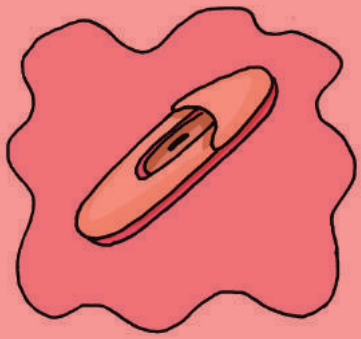
MASTURBATION MYTHS



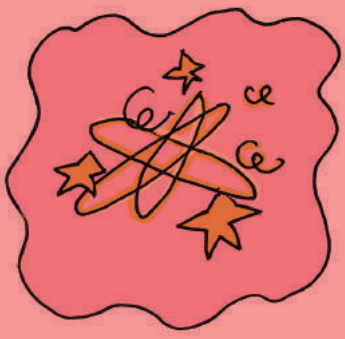
Only girls without a boyfriend masturbate.



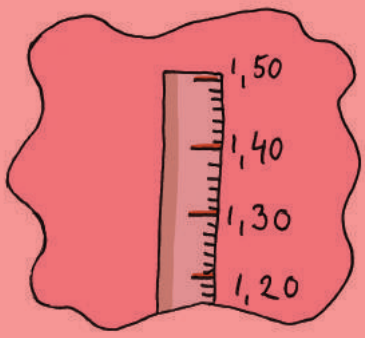
It can delay or induce your period.



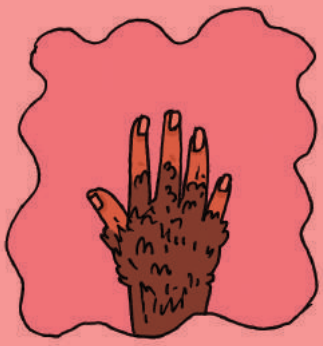
It prevents you from getting pregnant.



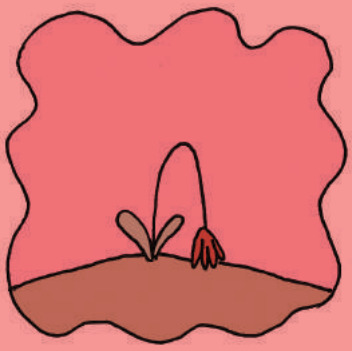
You can go blind... or go crazy.



You'll stop growing.



You'll grow hair on your arms. Or your toes will grow.



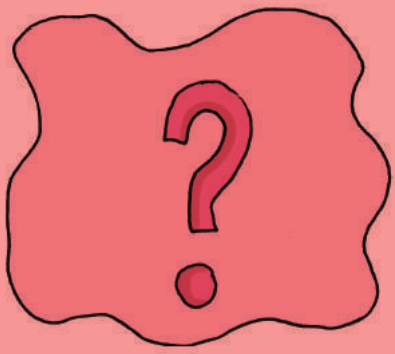
You won't enjoy sex.



It's only for men.



It's dirty.



It's weird.



You shouldn't talk about it! It's normal to feel guilty.



Only a man can truly satisfy you.

FIND THE WORDS

Do you like to be touched? If so, where? Can you describe what you like and what you don't? Say it out loud or write it down. It's important to find the words for how we feel, including what gives us pleasure and what doesn't, so that we can communicate it to others when we want to. But remember that not everyone likes to masturbate, and people start to experience sexual feelings at different times in their life, so you shouldn't be worried if you don't have sexual feelings.

ADVICE

In most cases, masturbation involves stimulation of the clitoris. You can use your fingers to play with your clitoris—stroke it, massage it, rub it, pinch or squeeze it lightly. You can also do the same with your nipples, breasts, inner thighs, ears, neck or other parts of your body that evoke pleasant sensations. These places are called erogenous zones because they give us pleasure.



PORN

If it hasn't already happened, it's very likely that at some point you'll discover pornographic images on the internet, social media or in magazines. In the UK, watching porn when you're under 18 isn't against the law, but it is illegal to buy porn until you turn 18.



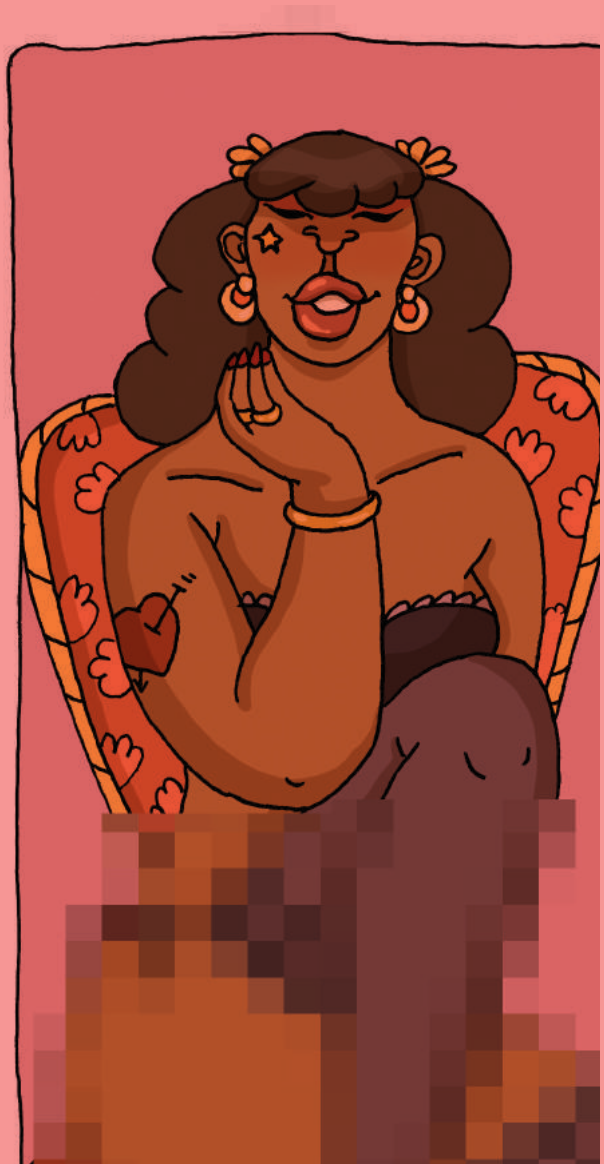
What else is illegal when it comes to porn?

- Showing porn to someone under 18.
- Sending or receiving sexual images or videos of someone under 18.
- Under-18s taking sexual videos or images of themselves or each other (even if everyone has consented).
- Scenes showing sexual assault, rape, life-threatening violence.
- Scenes showing sexual activity with animals or dead people.


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ISSUE I
PORN

For some, watching pornography can be sexually arousing and increase sexual desire, but it's important to know that:

- Videos and images are sometimes airbrushed and altered using photo and video editing programmes to make women look thinner and men more muscular.
- Typically, women in porn have large breasts and their vulvas are usually hairless. Vulvas in porn are often surgically altered to look 'neater' and more symmetrical.
- Men are often chosen because they have larger than average penises. The actors may also take drugs to maintain their erections for longer.
- Videos often show sexual positions that are uncomfortable, unrealistic, and sometimes even painful, and the focus is typically on male pleasure.





- Pornography may fail to show sexual partners having safe sex or conversations about consent. It may show women being forced to have sex, being hurt or humiliated. These images give the wrong impression that this behaviour is acceptable or that it's what women enjoy sexually.
- And seriously—how is it that all women manage to orgasm immediately, repeatedly, in all sorts of positions? Remember: most mainstream porn is *acting.*

It's not shameful to watch porn, but you should know that most mainstream porn doesn't accurately depict how people have sex in real life—so people should not expect bodies to look or behave like they do in porn, or assume that sexual partners will want to imitate the sexual behaviours shown in porn. In real life it's very important to discuss what both people want and to only do something if both parties are happy and have consented.

chapter 6

sex





Sexual Attraction

During puberty, and even before that, it's normal to have the desire to masturbate, and to imagine how you would want to be touched by someone else. You can be sexually attracted to anyone.

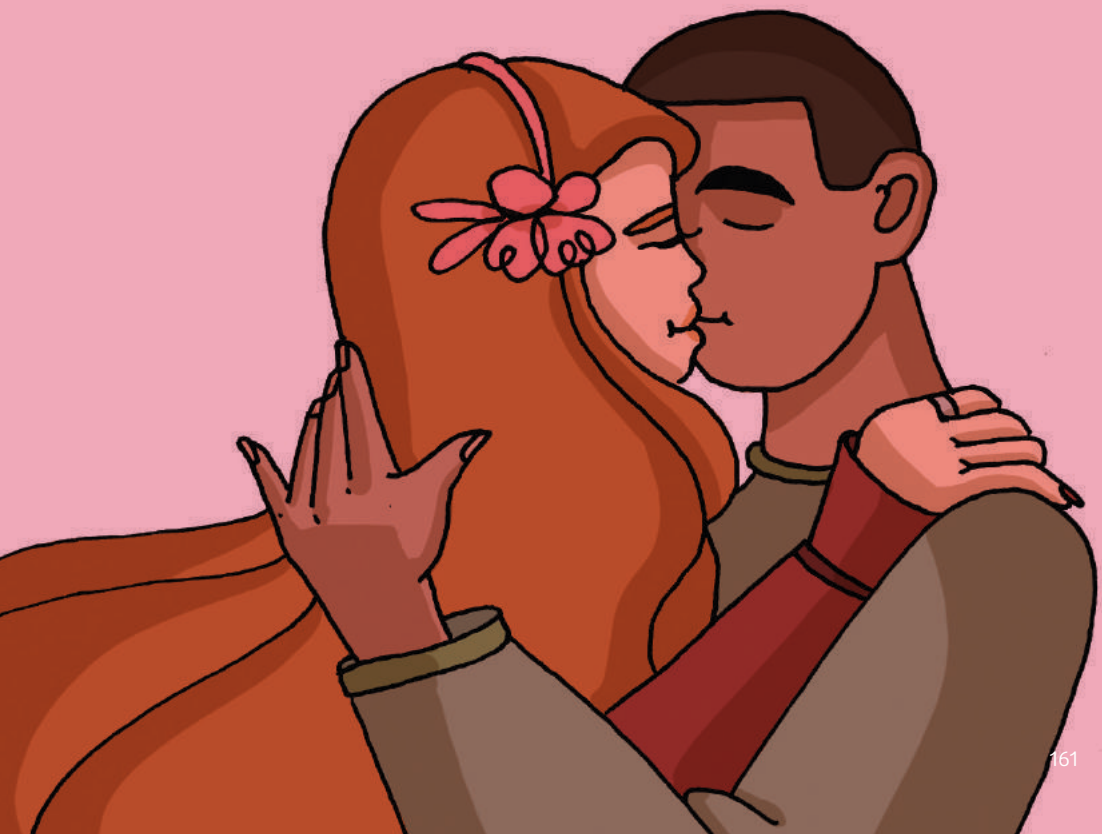
What is Sex?

The word **sex** can be used to describe any sexual activity, including penetrative vaginal sex as well as any other intimate sexual and physical acts for sexual pleasure. These could include: masturbation (solo sex), fingering (use of fingers to stimulate another person's genitals), vaginal sex (penetration of the vagina with a penis or sex toy), anal sex (penetration of the anus with a penis or sex toy), oral sex (using the mouth and tongue to stimulate your partner's genital area) and any other kind of kissing, massaging or touching.



Sex is A conversAtion

Sex is about talking to your partner about your and their sexual needs, desires and feelings. It is important that everyone feels comfortable during sex and that everyone is enjoying themselves.



The First Time

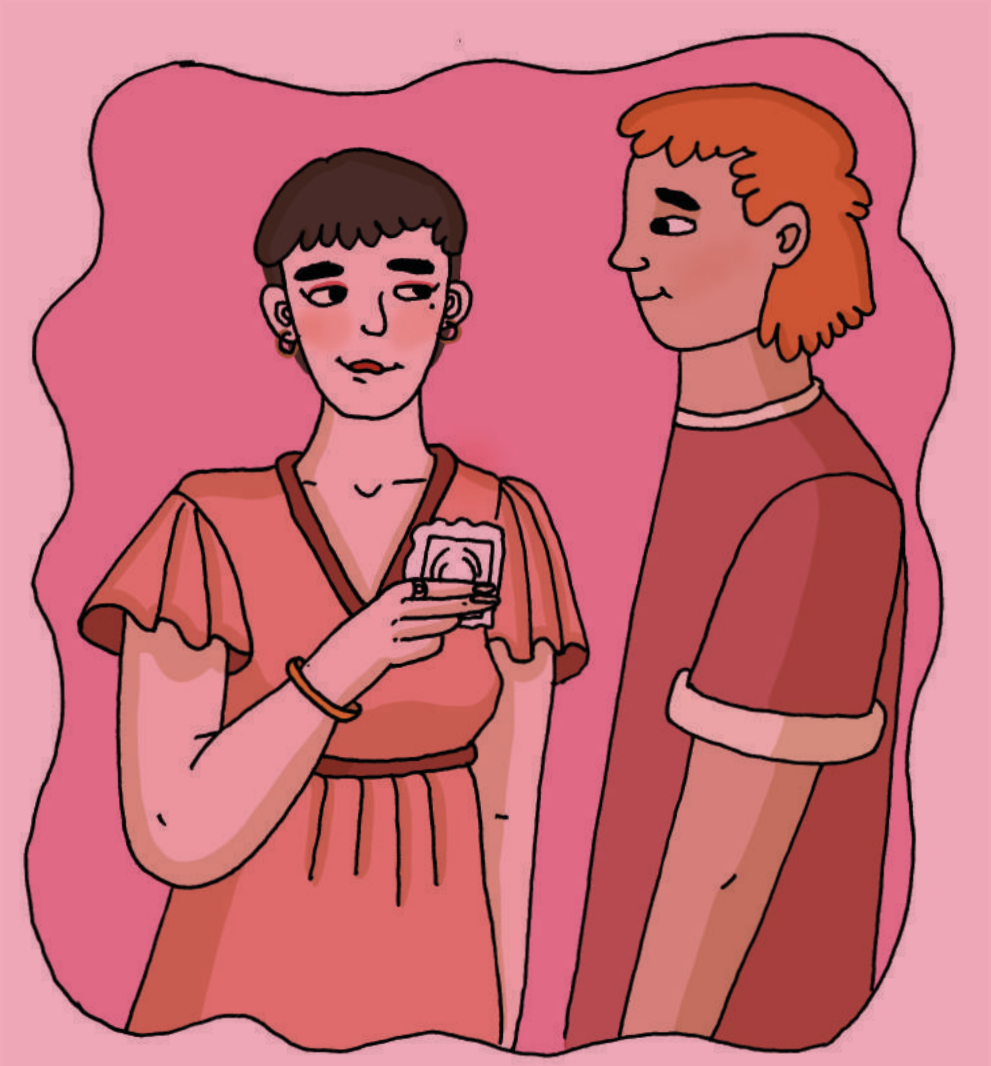
There are a lot of myths and misconceptions about virginity. The most common one is that your hymen 'breaks' *(read Chapter 1)*. But that's not necessarily the case and your first time may not even involve any penetration. There is no right or wrong way to have sex, and your first experience may just involve stimulation of the sexual organs by kissing, touching or rubbing. No matter what kind of sex you're thinking of having, if you're doing it for the first time, there are a few important things to keep in mind:



We often use the term 'losing your virginity', but this can be problematic. When you have sex for the first time you're not losing any part of yourself!



Make sure you feel safe and ready to have sex. There's no shame in waiting or admitting you're not ready. Sex must be a mutual and pleasant decision.



If you're ready to have sex with a male, it's important to talk to your partner about using condoms. Condoms are the only method of contraception that will protect you from unwanted pregnancy, *and* sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Even if you're using another method of contraception (like the pill or IUD/IUS), it's important to keep using condoms until you're sure that you and your partner have been tested and there's no risk of anyone contracting an STI.

What is sexual consent?

Sex should always be a safe and fun experience, based on mutual consent. Any kind of sexual act without consent is defined as rape or sexual abuse. Giving and requesting consent sets your personal boundaries, respects those of your partner, and makes sure you're on the same page. Everyone involved must agree to have sex–**every time**–whether this is your first time or 100th time. If you're unsure whether your partner is consenting or you haven't given your consent, you should ask them or stop immediately.
The legal age of consent varies across countries. In the UK the age of consent is 16, which means that having sex with someone below the age of consent is a crime.

If you've experienced abuse or trauma, your experience is valid and you deserve support. Please see Chapter 8 for more advice.



THE GROUND RULES FOR CONSENT

- **It has to be given freely.** Consent is a choice made without manipulation or pressure and not under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

- **You can change your mind.** Anyone can change their mind about what they want to do at any time. Even if you initially wanted to have sex but then reconsidered, it's your right to withdraw your consent!

- **You need to be informed.** You can only agree to something if you have full knowledge of the situation. If someone tells you that they'll use a condom and subsequently don't, you have every right to withdraw your consent because this is not what you agreed to. Communication is key!

- **It should be fun.** People don't talk about this enough, but sex is supposed to be fun and pleasurable for everyone involved. If at any point you're not having fun, then you should stop.

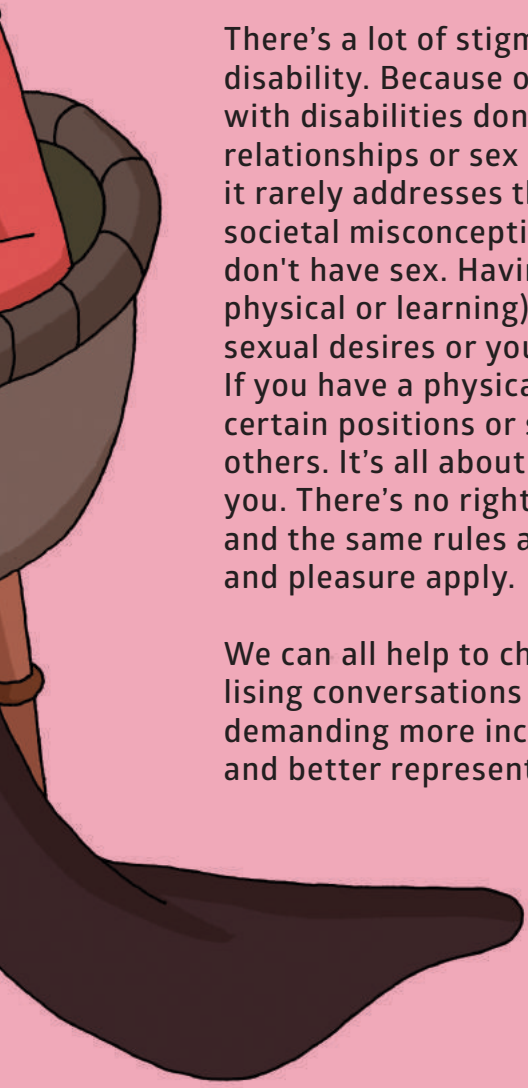
- **It's specific.** Saying yes to one thing (for example, oral sex) doesn't mean that you've agreed to other things (for example, penetrative sex).

Only you can give consent. Your clothes or behaviour don't determine your choice. Sexual consent is always clearly stated and there should be no question of it or ambiguity. Consent is not just about the law, it's about having respect for another human being.

SILENCE OR THE ABSENCE OF A 'NO' IS NOT CONSENT.



SEX AND DISABILITY



There’s a lot of stigma when it comes to sex and disability. Because of this stigma, many people with disabilities don't experience adequate relationships or sex education, and even if they do, it rarely addresses their specific needs. There's a societal misconception that people with disabilities don't have sex. Having a disability (whether physical or learning) doesn't necessarily alter your sexual desires or your willingness to express them. If you have a physical disability, there may be certain positions or sex toys that work better than others. It’s all about finding what works best for you. There’s no right or wrong way of having sex, and the same rules around sexual consent and pleasure apply.

We can all help to challenge the stigma by normalising conversations around sex and disability, demanding more inclusive sex education and better representation.

How Does Pregnancy Happen?

Once you hit puberty, you'll most likely begin to ovulate once a month, halfway through the menstrual cycle. During ovulation, an unfertilised egg moves from one ovary down the fallopian tube where it reaches the uterus. If you have unprotected sex (penetration of the vagina with a penis) around the time of ovulation, there's a high chance of you becoming pregnant. While you can get pregnant at any point during your menstrual cycle, this is the phase when it's most likely. After unprotected sex, the sperm cells, which can survive in the vagina for several days, move upwards towards the fallopian tubes. If one of them contains an egg, the individual sperm try to make their way to it. When a sperm manages to break through the egg wall, fertilisation occurs. Pregnancy is only possible during a certain phase of life (approximately between the ages of 12 to 51), when menstruation and ovulation happen regularly.

ATTENTION!

It's important to use contraception **every time** you have sex if you don't want to get pregnant. Remember, you can still get pregnant:

- even before your first menstruation, as you will ovulate for the first time before you get your first period
- when your cycle is irregular
- during your period

How to prevent unwanted pregnancy and STIs

If you decide to have sex with someone, it's important to consider how to protect yourself from an unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections or diseases. If you want to protect yourself against both, you should use a condom **every time**. There are many methods of contraception to choose from and you might need to try a few before you find the right one for your body and lifestyle. In the UK, everyone can access contraception for free from a GP or sexual health clinic. If you are under 25, you can go to a Brook clinic and get free condoms through the c-card scheme. Here is a list of some of the available contraceptive methods:

condom (external)



A condom is a thin, stretchy pouch, usually made from latex (a type of rubber) or latex-free plastic. It's one of the most reliable ways of preventing pregnancy. The condom is placed over the penis, and it collects the sperm so that it doesn't reach the vagina. As well as preventing pregnancy, a condom is the only method of contraception to prevent STIs. So you can also use them for sex toys.

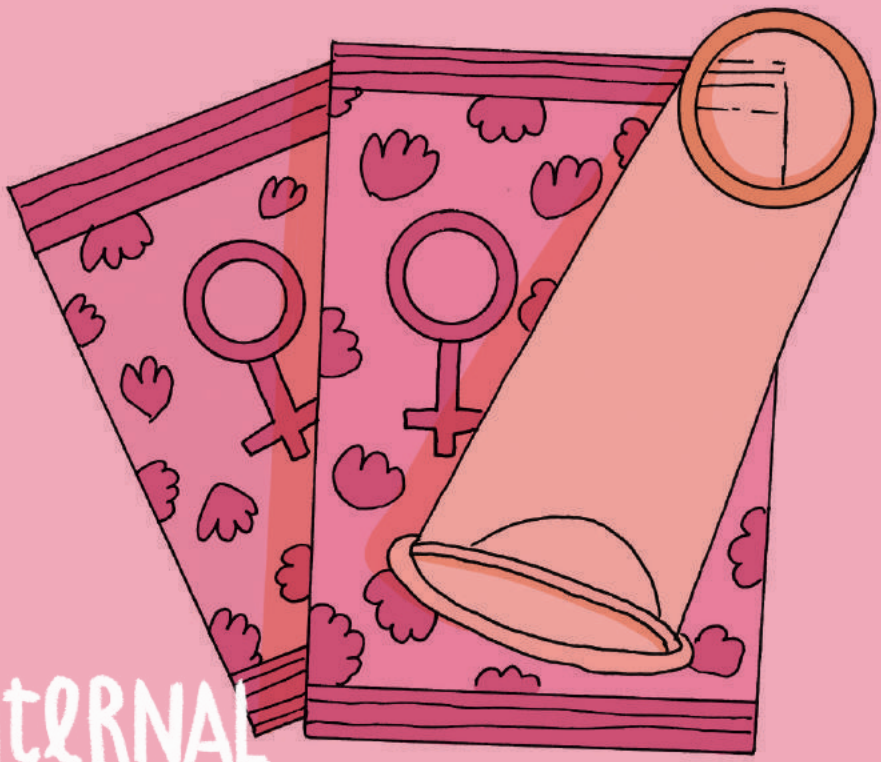
You can get them without a prescription, they come in a wide variety and are found virtually everywhere (pharmacy, corner shop, supermarket, sexual health clinic or petrol station).

Opening the package and putting on a condom before sex can be a little strange at first, but it's something you get used to! They can also break if not handled carefully.



Be prepared

Buy a pack and have them handy. This will give you access to contraception and you'll always be prepared to practice safe sex.

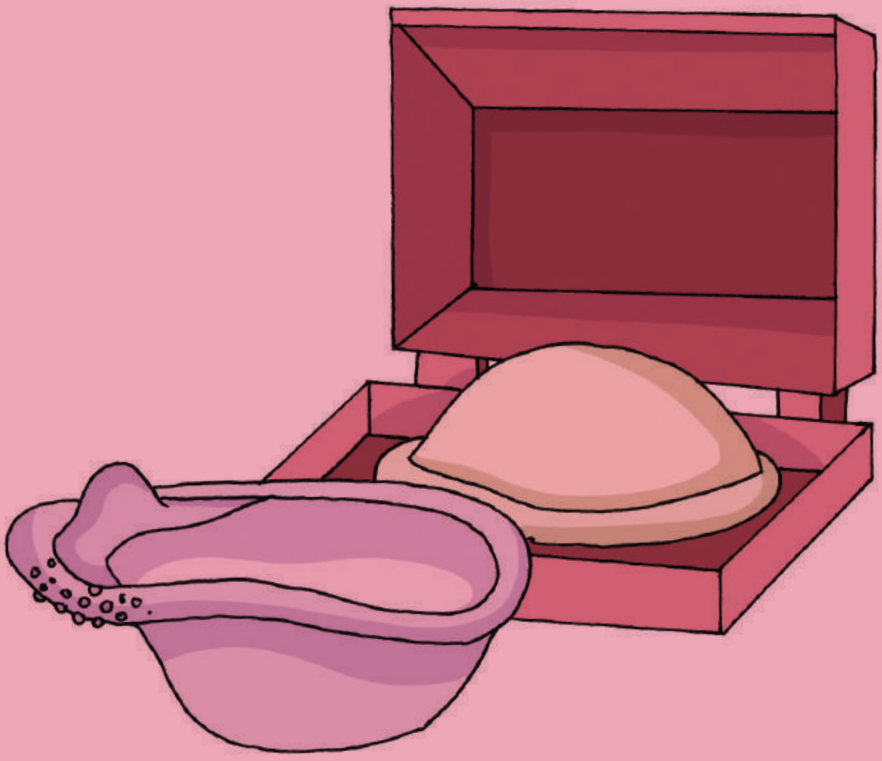


INTERNAL CONDOMS (FEMALE)

Made of polyurethane, silicone or latex, they provide protection against unwanted pregnancy and STIs. A female condom is placed in the vagina before sex. One end is closed and goes into the vagina, while the other end is open and the ring sits outside the vaginal opening.

No side effects, no hormones, reduced risk of getting an STI. When used correctly, they're 95% effective (NHS).

More expensive than male condoms and harder to find. The outer condom ring can be uncomfortable to use. They can make popping noises during sex, which can be distracting and sometimes funny.



DIAPHRAGM

It's a barrier method of contraception. It looks like a dome-shaped bowl and is made of thin rubber or silicone. Like female condoms, it's not widely available. Only a GP can pick out the right diaphragm for you.
It has to be placed in the vagina before sex to prevent sperm passing through the cervix.
It must be used with spermicide (a gel that kills sperm).



If for some reason you can't use hormonal contraceptives and you don't like condoms, the diaphragm may be a good solution for you.



More difficult to insert. Unlike a condom, it doesn't protect against STIs. Some doctors believe it may even provoke cystitis (bladder infection).

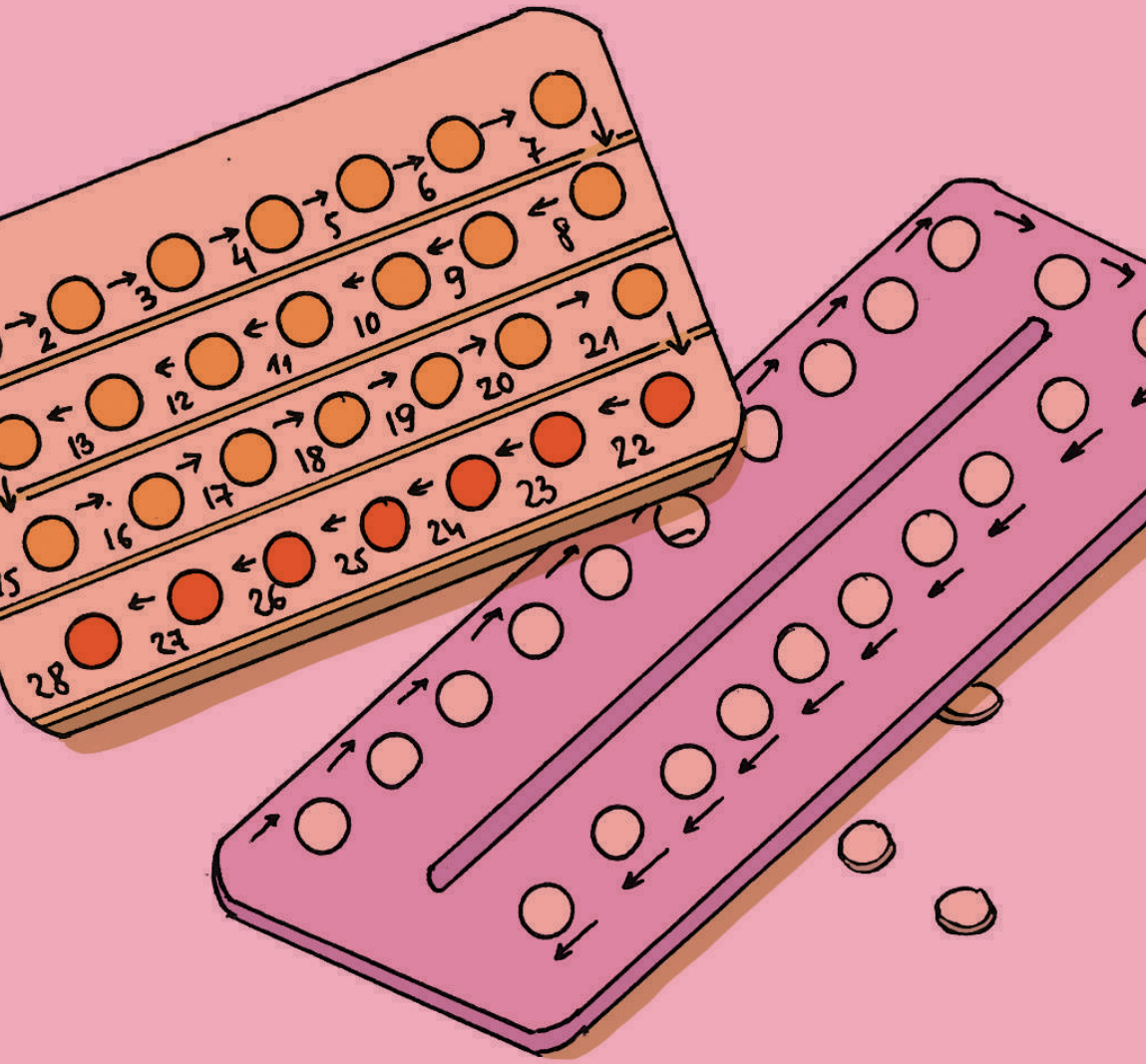
ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES (THE PILL)

Also known as 'the pill', they need to be taken daily. They contain hormones that stop ovulation. There are different types of hormone compositions and concentrations, so you need to talk to a doctor or nurse to help you decide which contraceptive pill is the best option for you. The most important thing is to remember to take **one** pill every day, otherwise they are ineffective.



The contraceptive pill is a safe, simple and convenient way to prevent pregnancy. Some pills have other desirable effects—they can reduce acne and make your periods lighter. You can stop using them whenever you want, but make sure to talk to a doctor or gynaecologist first.

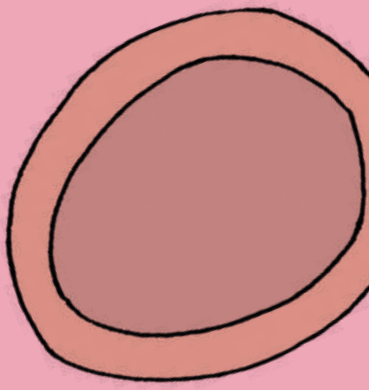
It doesn't protect against STIs. You have to remember to take your pill every day at the same time. Different pills may cause different side effects, such as weight gain, depression or a decreased sex drive. You may need to try more than one pill to find one that suits you.


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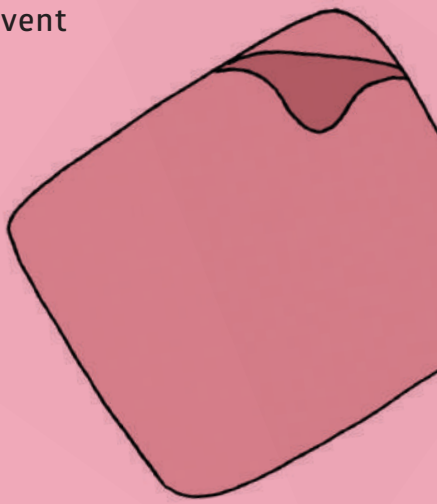
other contraceptives?

Remember that none of these methods protect against STIs.

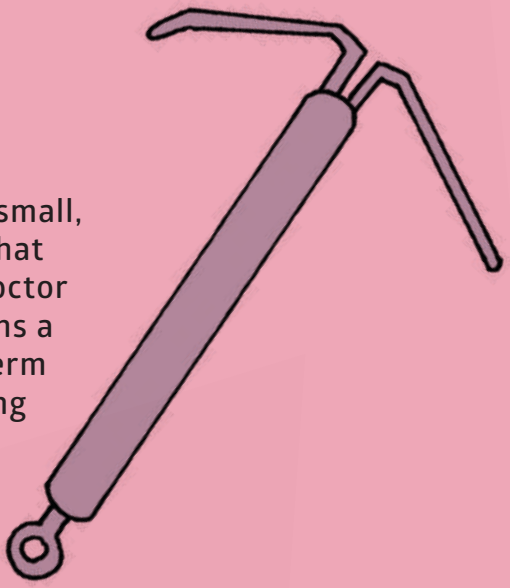
The **vaginal ring** is a small, flexible ring made of plastic that you place in your vagina. It contains the same hormones as the birth control pill. These hormones prevent ovulation.



The **contraceptive patch** is a small sticky patch which you attach to your skin like a plaster. It contains the same two hormones as the birth control pill, which prevent ovulation.



The **contraceptive implant** is a small plastic rod, about 4 cm in length, that is inserted under the skin of the upper arm. It contains a hormone that stops ovulation and thickens the cervical mucus, preventing sperm from reaching an egg.



The **hormonal IUS** is an intrauterine system. It's a small, T-shaped plastic cylinder that is inserted by a nurse or doctor inside the uterus. It contains a hormone that prevents sperm from reaching and fertilising an egg.

The **contraceptive injection** is an injectable form of a hormone called progestogen, which prevents your ovaries from releasing an egg (ovulation). It lasts for up to 8, 12 or 13 weeks depending on the type used.

The **IUD** is a non-hormonal intrauterine device. Similarly to the IUS, it's a small, T-shaped plastic cylinder that is inserted by a nurse or doctor into the uterus. It contains small amounts of copper, which is toxic to sperm and prevents the fertilised egg from implanting in the uterus.

How To Talk To Your Partner About Safe Sex

You may come across a wide range of excuses for not using condoms. Remember, you're the only person who can take responsibility for your health. Here are some tips for talking to someone about practicing safe sex. If they continue to refuse to use a condom, you should ask yourself 'is this really the kind of person I want to be having sex with?'

Don't you trust me enough?

It's not about mistrust, I would worry less if we used protection.

We can use another method so we don't need to use condoms.

Other contraceptive methods (like the pill) prevent unwanted pregnancy, but not STIs. People can have an STI without being aware of it.

They don't have my size.

There are different types of condoms that come in different sizes, so this almost definitely isn't the case. We can find something that works.

I'll experience less pleasure with a condom.

You can get condoms that enhance pleasure, such as ribbed ones, and you can get extra thin ones. Sometimes condoms can help maintain an erection for longer! Plus sex will be more fun for everyone without the worry of STIs or unwanted pregnancy.

I'll pull out before I come. (Withdrawal method)

This is not a reliable method of contraception. There's always a risk of ejaculating prematurely or by accident which means I can get pregnant.

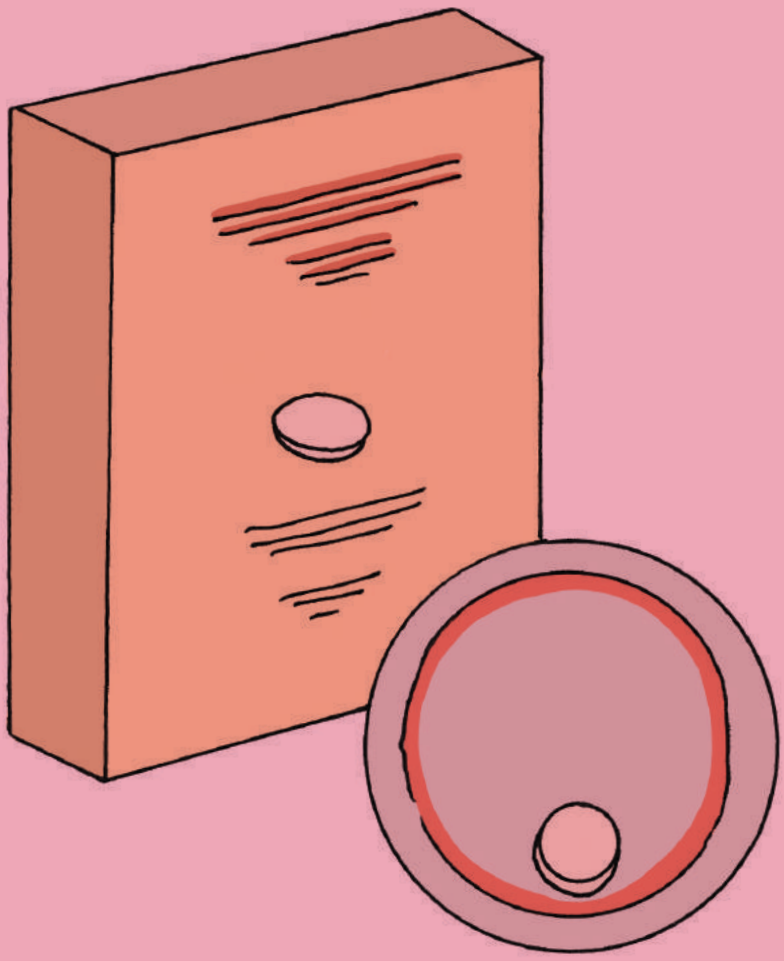
emergency contraception

Accidents happen! If you've had unprotected sex, you may be able to prevent pregnancy by using emergency contraception. There are different types of emergency contraception—an IUD and two types of pills (sometimes known as 'the morning after pill').

- The IUD is the most effective method of emergency contraception and can be fitted up to five days after unprotected sex. After that it can be used as an ongoing form of contraception.

- There are two different types of emergency contraception pills: Levonorgestrel (Levonelle) which can be taken four days after unprotected sex but is most effective within the first 72 hours (3 days) or Ulipristal Acetate (EllaOne) which must be taken within five days after having unprotected sex. Emergency contraceptive pills are not effective if taken after ovulation. These pills should **only** be taken in case of emergency and shouldn't be taken every time you have sex *(see pages 170-77 for contraception methods).*

Emergency contraception can be obtained for free from your local sexual health clinic or GP—remember the IUD must be fitted by a trained doctor or nurse.



Emergency contraceptive pills can also be bought from pharmacies, including online pharmacies. Sometimes they can be free, so make sure to ask the pharmacist if you're eligible for free emergency contraception. Usually, there are no serious short or long-term side effects from the emergency IUD or morning after pill but it is possible to experience them, in which case you should book a visit to the GP. Remember, emergency contraception doesn't cause abortion.

WHAT DOES NOT PREVENT YOU FROM BECOMING PREGNANT?

- Interrupted sexual intercourse
- Having sex during your period
- Bouncing up and down after sex so that all the sperm flows out
- Douching or rinsing out your vagina after sex
- Not having an orgasm
- Aspirin





AM I PREGNANT?

Your partner didn't ejaculate in your vagina, but you also didn't use a condom or another form of contraception.

You had sex and you forgot to take your birth control pill or the condom broke.

You had unprotected sex in the sea, a pool or bathtub.

You had sex during your period, and didn't use any protection.

You had sex without a condom, but then you took a shower, peed or washed yourself.

You had unprotected sex and your partner ejaculated inside you.

If you recognise any of these situations, there's a chance you might be pregnant. Take a pregnancy test or visit a sexual health clinic.

Your partner pulled out before he ejaculated inside you, or finished near the entrance of your vagina.

You had vaginal penetrative sex (with a penis) for the first time and you didn't use protection.

WHEN TO TAKE A PREGNANCY TEST

If you've had unprotected sex and you think you might be pregnant, take a pregnancy test. Tests are more precise after the first day of your missed period. If your period comes regularly, you'll be able to calculate the expected first day of your next cycle. If you're unsure, it's a good idea to wait at least three weeks from the day you think you may have conceived before doing the test, or check the instructions to see when it's best to use it. There are two main types of pregnancy tests:

- **urine tests** — sold in pharmacies
- **blood tests** — can be requested by your doctor



HOW TO TAKE THE TEST

All pregnancy tests detect the human chorionic gonadotropin hormone (hCG), which is first produced approximately six days after the egg is fertilised. Most tests come in a box containing one or two test strips. You should pee on the strip and the result will appear in a couple of minutes, however, there are different pregnancy test brands, so make sure you read the instructions carefully each time.


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IF THE TEST IS NEGATIVE

A negative result means you're probably not pregnant, but there is always a chance that the hCG hormone is not yet detectable. If you've missed your period then you should take another test. If you want to speak to someone about the result, or you're still worried, it's worth speaking to a GP or sexual health professional. If you weren't trying to get pregnant, you can talk to them about contraception too.



IF THE TEST IS POSITIVE

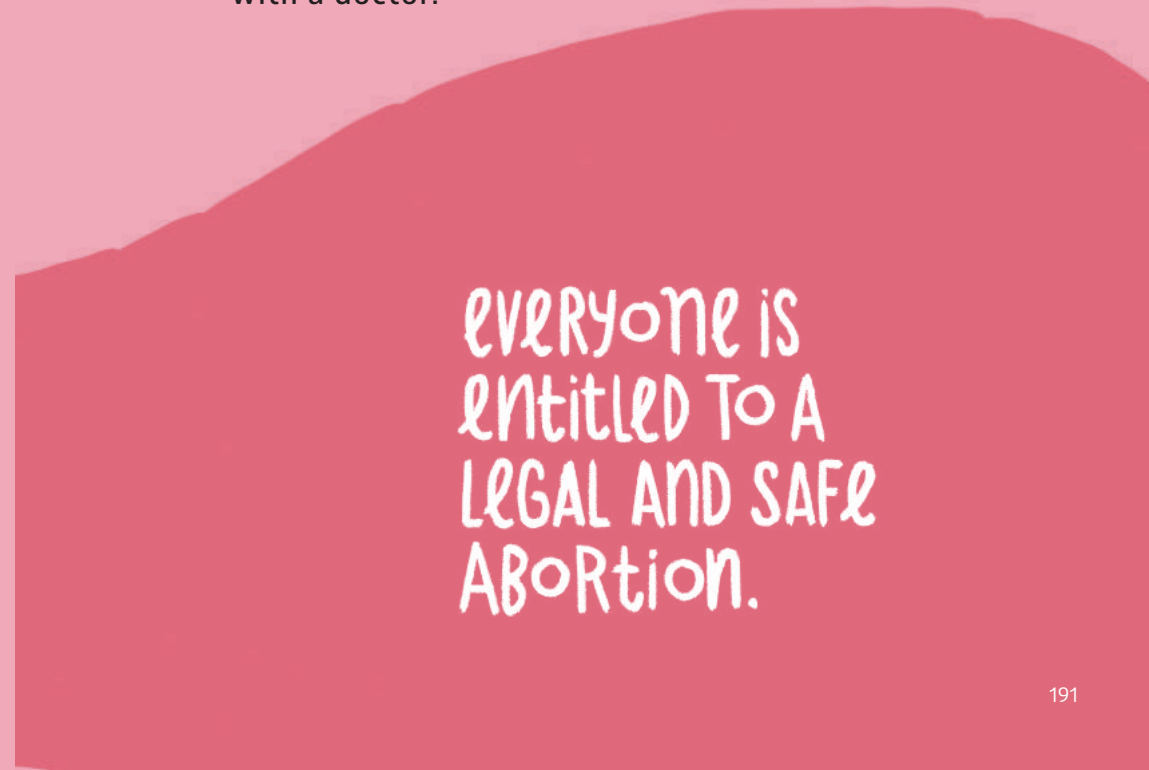
If the pregnancy test comes out positive, you're almost definitely pregnant. You should book an appointment with your doctor or nurse as soon as possible. They will ask you some questions and confirm whether you're pregnant. If you're pregnant, you have three options available and you have the right to choose any one of them:

- continue the pregnancy and raise the child.
- continue the pregnancy and place the child for adoption.
- end the pregnancy by having an abortion. An abortion is a safe procedure, but like any medical procedure, the doctor or nurse who is advising you should always give you the full details about the risks. In England, Wales and Scotland, you can get an abortion up to 24 weeks of pregnancy. In the UK, abortions are legal and safe. You can get an abortion at any age—even under the age of 16. They're performed in specialist clinics by specifically trained doctors.

Abortion

Abortion can **only** be performed by a doctor or nurse at a specialist clinic. This is not something that can be done on your own, as it can be **very dangerous**. There are two main types of abortion: medical and surgical abortion. Most abortions are medical and are carried out using two pills. The first pill ends the pregnancy and the second pill expels the pregnancy. Surgical abortion involves a minor operation which is performed under anaesthesia at a specialised clinic.

Everyone is entitled to a legal and safe abortion. Women might choose to have an abortion for various reasons. It's important that you have all the information you need to make a decision that is right for you. For more information about abortion visit **brook.org.uk/abortion** or consult with a doctor.





CAN I HAVE AN ABORTION IF I'M UNDER 16?



If you're under 16 you can consent to an abortion without having to tell a parent or carer. However, your doctor will try to encourage you to involve a trusted adult for support as you'll need someone over 18 there to accompany you home if the procedure involves a general anaesthetic. Abortions are confidential. The only time a doctor or healthcare professional will share your information is if they think you're in danger, and if this happens, they will discuss it with you first.

For more information and advice visit:
bpas.org/abortion-care/under-16

chapter 7

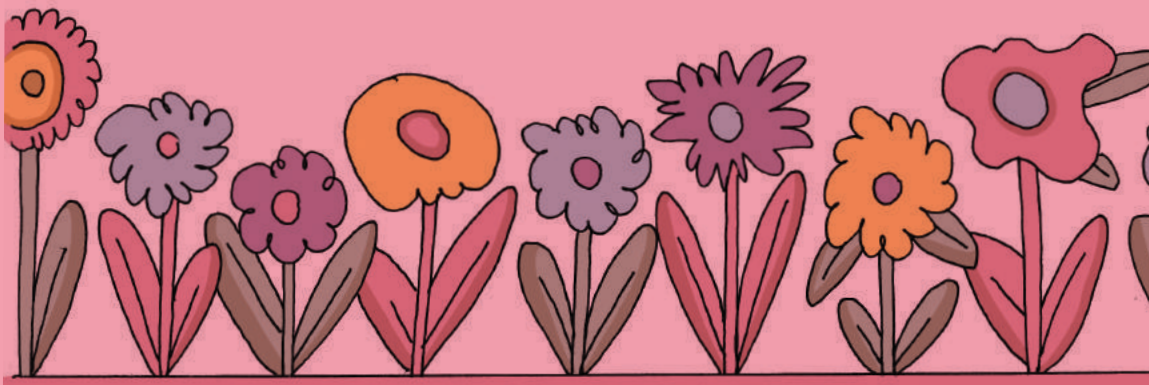
HEALTH

This chapter gives you important guidance on how to keep your vulva healthy and what to look out for.

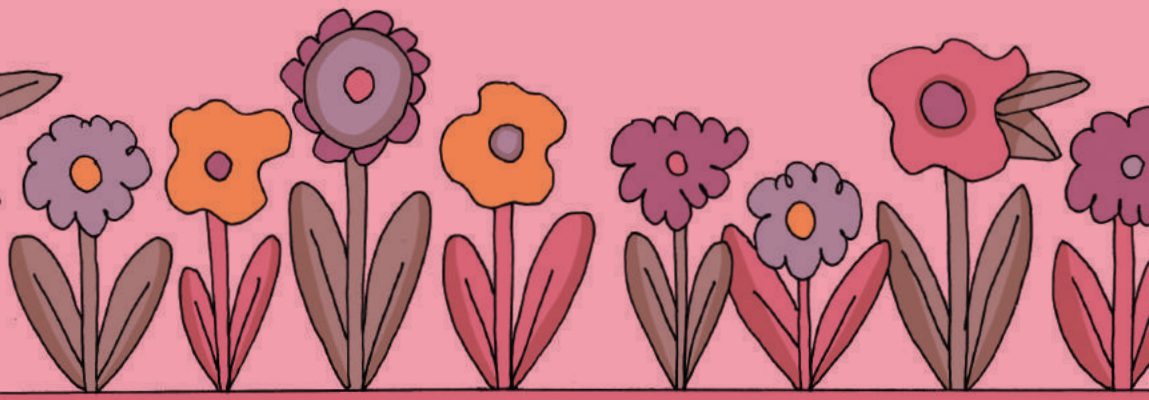


VAGINA SUPERPOWERS

Did you know that the vagina is self-cleaning? We're not kidding! It's a fact. A complex mix of different types of good bacteria—also known as vaginal flora or the vaginal microbiome—protect your vagina against infection, with lactobacilli being the most important ones. These good bacteria are responsible for your vagina's self-cleaning superpower.



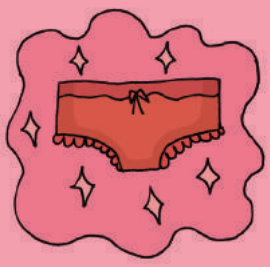
Lactobacilli produce lactic acid and hydrogen peroxide to maintain a vaginal pH of approximately 3.5. This is highly acidic, which prevents the growth of harmful pathogens, helping to fight infections.



Looking after your vulva and vagina

You can wash your vulva gently every day using water or a mild fragrance-free soap. There are lots of 'feminine hygiene' products that are marketed to promote good hygiene but in fact these can upset the pH balance of your vagina and lead to irritation or infections such as thrush and bacterial vaginosis.

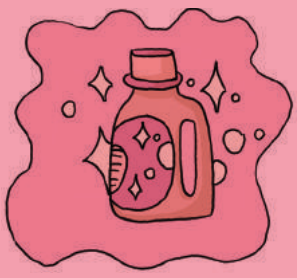
There are lots of unhelpful myths about vulvas, especially about the way they're supposed to look or smell. While everyone wants to feel fresh and clean, the 'feminine hygiene' industry has worked hard to create a fear that our genitals are dirty. For example, you might hear or read that your vagina should smell like flowers. This isn't the case! Here's some advice on how to look after your vulva and vagina:



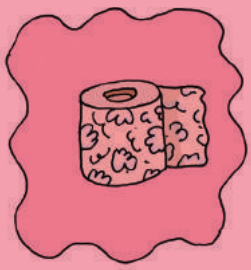
Wear clean underwear every day.



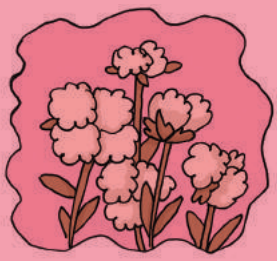
Wash new underwear before you wear it.



Use a small amount of unscented laundry detergent for your routine washing.



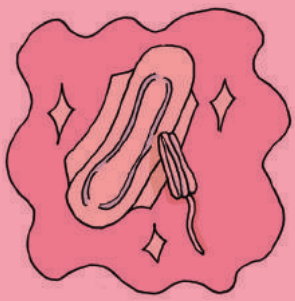
When using toilet paper, wipe from front to back to avoid spreading the germs that live around your anus.



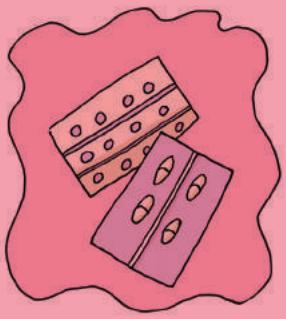
Wear cotton underwear.



Don't use vaginal douches, deodorants, wipes or washes that disturb the vaginal flora. These only increase the risk of vaginal infection. Warm water is enough to clean your vulva.



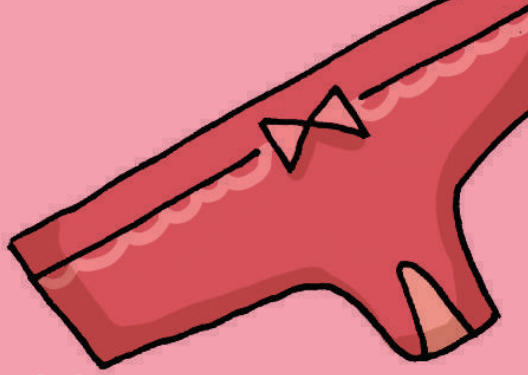
When you're on your period, change your pad or tampon at least every four hours.



If you need to take antibiotics, consult with your doctor about ways to protect yourself against vaginal infections, as antibiotics can disrupt the good bacteria, potentially causing thrush.



Shower and wash regularly.



VAGINAL DISCHARGE

Have you ever noticed white or yellow stains in your underwear? This is called vaginal discharge—a fluid that comes out from your vagina—and it's perfectly normal. It's largely made up of cervical mucous, vaginal fluid and bacteria. All women have vaginal discharge that varies in appearance, volume, consistency and smell throughout the menstrual cycle.

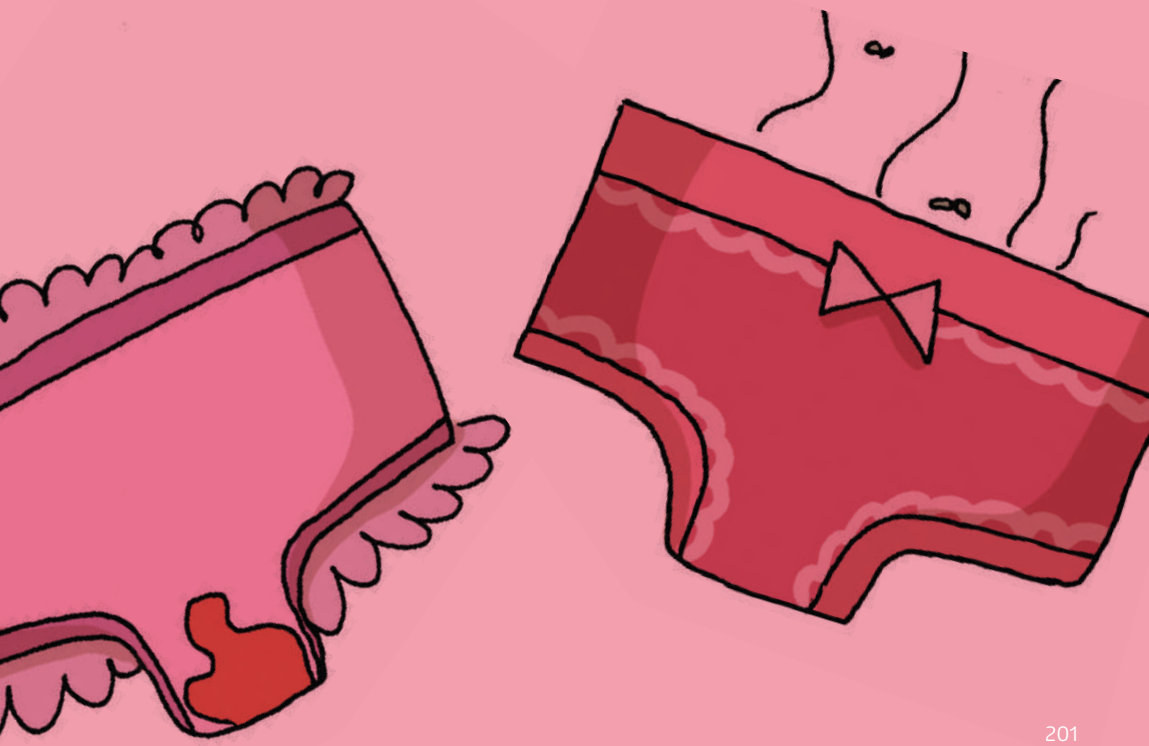
Discharge can be clear, wet, white, light yellow, and sometimes thick or sticky. Some people have lots of discharge and others don't; everyone is different. Discharge is not an indication that your vagina is 'dirty'. It's your vagina's way of self-cleaning and keeping healthy.

If your discharge changes significantly; has a fishy smell, is green, grey, frothy or has the consistency of cottage cheese, this could be a sign of vaginal infection. If you notice these symptoms you should visit your GP or a sexual health clinic.



smell

Every vagina has a natural odour that usually changes at different stages of the menstrual cycle. It's absolutely normal! So how do you know if your vagina is healthy? Be aware of what is normal for you. If you notice any changes then it's a good idea to make an appointment with a healthcare professional.



Most common infections

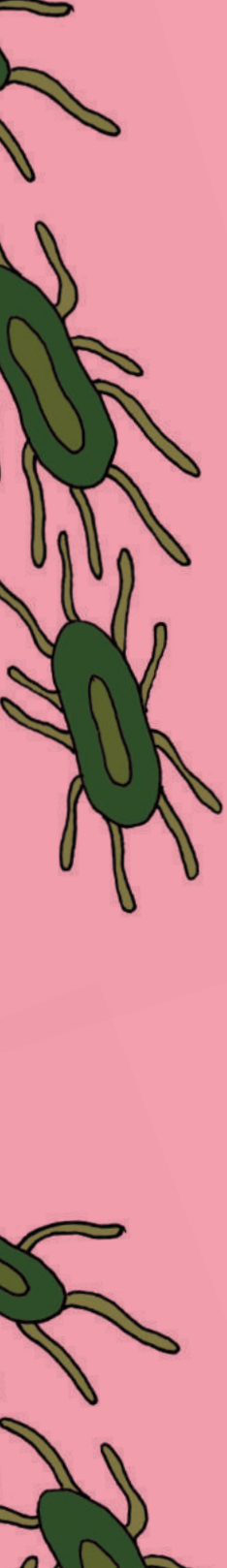
Bacterial vaginosis (BV)

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is caused by an imbalance in the natural bacteria found in the vagina. It's the most frequent cause of unusual discharge and is more common in women who are sexually active. It's not an STI but it can be passed between female sexual partners.

Symptoms: Half of those with BV don't experience any symptoms at all. For those who do, unusual discharge is the most common symptom. It can have a strong fishy smell, and can be white or grey and watery. If you have pain, burning or itching, this is likely to be another infection.

Causes: You are more likely to develop BV if you use vaginal douches or products such as wipes and deodorants, strong washing detergents or soaps, or if you've had BV before.

Treatment: Antibiotics or vaginal gel prescribed by your doctor.



THRUSH

Thrush is a yeast infection that is caused by a fungus that lives naturally in the body, called *Candida albicans*. If the presence of this candida yeast overgrows in your vagina, it can cause irritation and uncomfortable symptoms. Thrush isn't an STI but can be passed on during sex—both men and women can experience thrush but it's more common in women. Some people just have one episode and for others it's recurring.

Symptoms: Itching, redness, burning during urination, pain during or after sex, swelling of the vulva, increased white or yellow vaginal discharge that may look clumpy (a bit like cottage cheese).

Causes: Thrush can develop when the conditions in the vaginal microbiome change. It can be caused by antibiotics, which kill the good bacteria, or hormonal changes such as during pregnancy. It can also be passed on through sex, and can be caused by irritation from tight clothing and synthetic underwear (non-cotton).

Treatment: Anti-fungal medicine such as creams, tablets and pessaries can be bought over the counter or prescribed by your GP. It's necessary to get a diagnosis before taking medication as lots of infections have similar symptoms.

CYSTITIS



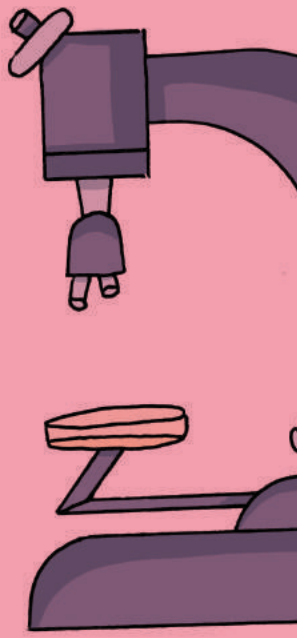
Cystitis is caused by an infection of the bladder and is not an STI. It can occur at any age in both men and women. Almost all women will experience it at least once in their lifetime, while some will have it multiple times. It's often referred to as a urinary tract infection (UTI).

Symptoms: Pain or burning sensation when you pee, frequent urge to pee, pain and cramps in the lower back or belly, urine that is dark or cloudy, traces of blood in urine and general feverishness.

Causes: Cystitis is caused by bacteria entering the urethra and travelling to the bladder. This can be caused by not emptying the bladder fully when you urinate or bacteria being transferred from the anus to the urethra (during sex, tampons, or not wiping front to back). It can also be caused by STIs such as chlamydia or gonorrhoea.

Treatment: A simple urine test can diagnose cystitis, which can then be treated with lots of water and painkillers (if mild) or with antibiotics.





DIFFERENT TYPES OF GYNAECOLOGICAL CHECK-UPS

A vaginal discharge test is usually done if you have symptoms such as unpleasant odour, itching or vaginal dryness, pain or bleeding during sexual intercourse, etc. The doctor takes a swab of the natural discharge from your vagina, which is then tested for harmful bacteria.

Smear test/cervical screening is an examination of cells taken from the surface of the cervix and the cervical canal. It's used to detect abnormal cells on your cervix that could lead to cervical cancer.



An ultrasound is a medical test that uses high frequency sound waves to see inside your body in a safe and painless way to create pictures of your ovaries, uterus and fallopian tubes so that they can be examined. Depending on the need, your doctor may examine your internal organs from the outside (by placing the ultrasound wand on the belly) or internally (with a special ultrasound wand that is inserted into your vagina).

MENSTRUAL CRAMPS

Lots of people experience menstrual cramps. You'll feel these cramps in your lower belly or back. They can range from mild to severe. While there may be no apparent cause for painful cramps, heavy or prolonged bleeding, it's sometimes a sign that something is wrong.

Some causes for painful menstrual periods other than PMS:

Uterine fibroids: Non-cancerous tumours that grow inside your uterus, on the walls of the uterus or on the outside of the uterus.

Endometriosis: A painful condition in which cells similar to the uterine lining grow outside the uterus — in the fallopian tubes or ovaries.

Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID): An infection of your reproductive organs (uterus, ovaries, fallopian tubes).

Cancer: There are various gynaecological cancers, which can affect the cervix, ovaries, uterus or vagina.

IF YOU HAVE VERY HEAVY AND/OR PAINFUL PERIODS, SEE A DOCTOR!



IRREGULAR PERIOD?

It's normal for your period to be irregular for the first couple of years and even later on you may miss a period for a number of reasons. It's important that you see a doctor to understand what's happening and get treatment, if necessary.

Some common causes of menstrual irregularities:

- Puberty
- Pregnancy
- Stress
- Eating disorders
- Excessive exercise
- Medication
- Contraception
- Mental health problems
- Sudden or extreme weight loss
- Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)
- Ovarian cysts



WHAT IS AN STI?

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) refers to a group of bacterial and viral infections that are transmitted through unprotected sex. Anyone who is sexually active can contract an STI—and it doesn't matter how many times you've had sex. Lots of people don't have any symptoms at all so it's really important that you use condoms when you have sex and get tested if you've had any type of unprotected sex.

Detect the STIs and other conditions: circle them and check their definitions on the next pages.



FIND: CHLAMYDIA; GONORRHOEA; HEPATITIS; HERPES; HIV; HPV; SYPHILIS; PUBIC LICE; TRICHOMONIASIS

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B M I T S R V W H S A P A T I
J O Z S I G N T D A T P I X P

STIs can have a number of symptoms, but many people don't experience any symptoms at all. If you've had any type of unprotected sex, you should visit a sexual health clinic or your GP to get tested. Most STIs are easily treated, but if left untreated they can often lead to more serious complications including infertility. Here are some definitions of common STIs. All of them can affect both men and women. More information can be found at **brook.org.uk/stis**

CHLAMYDIA

is the most common STI in young people under 25 in the UK. Depending on the type of unprotected sex you're having, it can affect the urethra, vagina, cervix, anus, throat or the eyes, but many people don't display any symptoms. Chlamydia is easily treated with antibiotics, but if left untreated, it can become chronic and lead to pelvic inflammatory disease and infertility.

HEPATITIS

is an inflammation of the liver. There are several types of hepatitis, but only hepatitis A, B and C can be spread through unprotected sex. In most cases, it has no symptoms, but early signs can include flu-like symptoms such as aching muscles, yellowing of the skin, headaches and a temperature. You can get a vaccine for hepatitis A and B, and while there is no vaccine for hepatitis C, you can get antiviral medication prescribed to relieve symptoms.

GONORRHOEA

is a bacterial infection, which can infect the throat, urinary tract, vagina, anus, rectum and eyes. It's the second most common bacterial STI in the UK. Symptoms, if any, usually appear within a couple of weeks after infection, but for some people it can take months. Luckily, it's easy to treat with antibiotics, but if left untreated, it can spread to other parts of the body and lead to infertility.

HERPES

is caused by two different strains of the herpes simplex virus, which causes sores on your genitals and/or mouth. It's a very common infection that stays in your body for life. It's spread from skin-to-skin contact with infected areas, usually during sex. Genital herpes may show up as blisters around your vulva, vagina, cervix, anus or other areas. Herpes causes periodic outbreaks of painful blisters and is very contagious, particularly when the sores are open. There's no cure for genital herpes so you're likely to have further outbreaks. If you contract herpes, you can learn what triggers your symptoms and prevent passing it on to others.

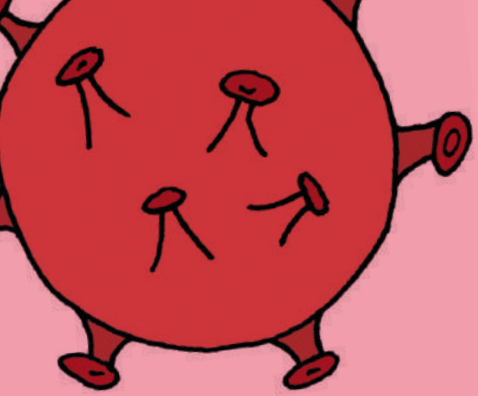
GENITAL WARTS

are caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV) and are small growths or bumps that appear around the genitals or anus. There are over 100 types of HPV, which affect different areas of the body. Some high-risk types of HPV can also cause cancer, but vaccination, regular screening and prompt treatment can protect against cancer and warts. About 30 different types can affect the genital skin. Most people who have HPV don't have any symptoms. It's very common to have HPV and not know. If warts do appear, the most common places are around the vulva and cervix, inside the vagina or anus, and on the upper thighs. You can get treatment for them from your doctor.



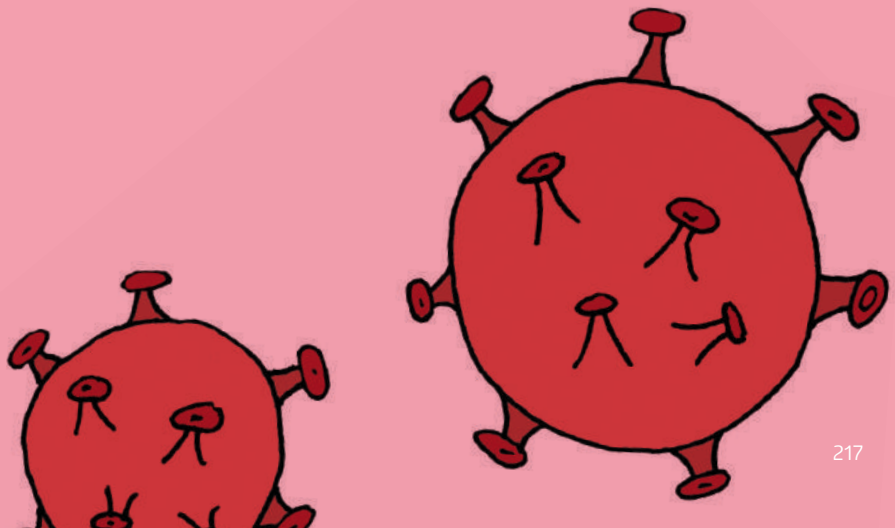
SYPHILIS

is caused by a bacteria called *Treponema pallidum*. It develops in three stages but it can easily be cured with antibiotics if treated early on. The first stage is an ulcer that appears on the area where the infection entered the body—the vagina, penis or anus—and some people may not notice they have it. If left untreated, the secondary stage could include flu-like symptoms, a rash on the hands or feet, swollen glands and weight loss. The last stage is the most dangerous. It can begin years or even decades after the first infection. It can cause serious conditions such as blindness, deafness, a stroke, dementia and heart disease. However, it is very unlikely to progress to this stage with regular STI check-ups.



HIV

stands for human immunodeficiency virus. It lives in the blood and damages the body's immune system, preventing it from fighting off infections. It's most commonly passed through unprotected vaginal or anal sex. Most people with HIV will experience flu-like symptoms for two weeks after getting the virus. After this, it's common not to have any more symptoms for years, during which time the virus will multiply and cause progressive damage. The earlier the diagnosis, the more likely damage can be prevented. HIV is not curable but it is preventable and treatable. People at a high risk of contracting HIV can take PrEP to reduce this risk. Also, if you think you have been exposed to HIV in the last 72 hours, you can take a preventative medicine called PEPSE/PEP which can stop you from contracting HIV.



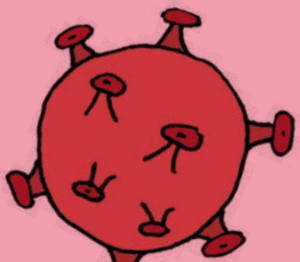




PUBIC LICE (CRABS)

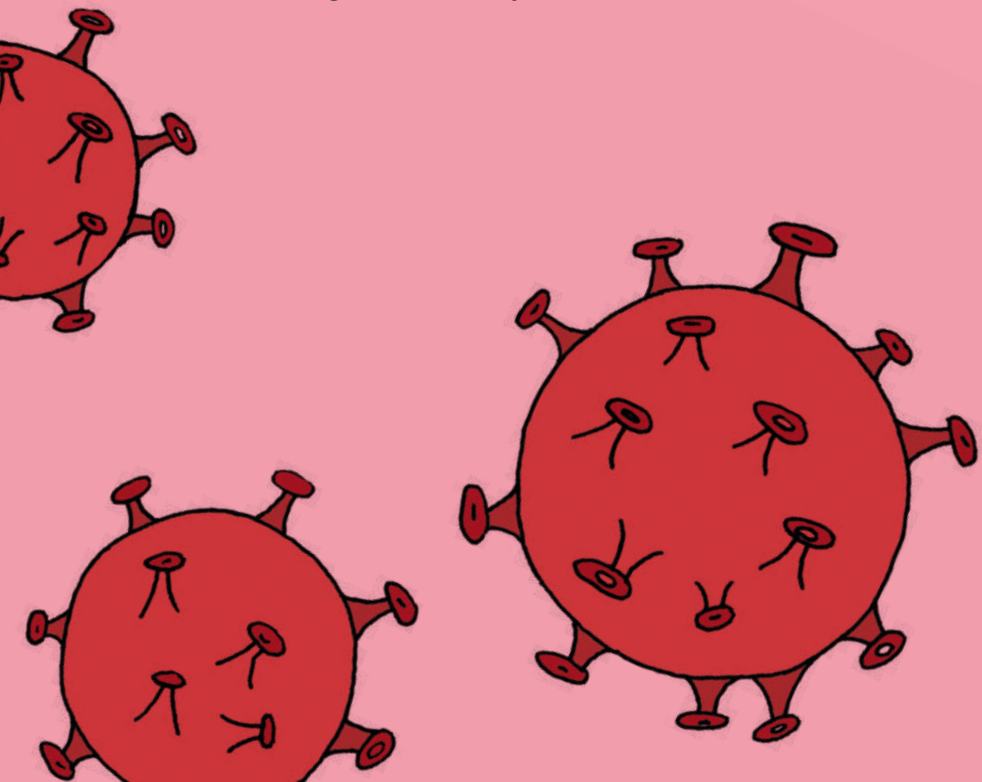
are small crab-like insects that live on pubic hair. They are not necessarily sexually transmitted but they are passed on through close body contact. They can take a few weeks to appear and they are only 2mm, so are hard to see. They are yellow-grey or red and they attach their eggs to the base of the hairline. Signs and symptoms include itching, black powder in your underwear (these are the lice droppings), brown eggs on your body hair and small blue spots or tiny specks of blood (caused by the bites). They won't go away without treatment and can spread to other parts of the body and to other people if left untreated. Treatment can be done at home using a special shampoo, lotion or cream.





TRICHOMONIASIS

is caused by a parasite called *Trichomonas vaginalis* (TV), which infects the vagina and urethra. Up to 50% of people have no symptoms, and when symptoms do appear they're easy to confuse with other STIs. These can include vaginal itching and swelling, lower abdominal pain, pain during sex and while urinating, unusual discharge (can be green and frothy) and itchy inner thighs. TV is easily treatable with antibiotics.




Medical prescription form
12: JUNE

THE MOST COMMON STI SYMPTOMS THAT AFFECT THE VULVA AND VAGINA



If you experience any of these symptoms, you should book an appointment with your GP or local sexual health clinic as soon as possible:

- Pain while peeing
- Pain during sex
- Bleeding between periods or after sex
- Yellow/green or bloody vaginal discharge
- Strong vaginal smell that is unusual for you
- Itching
- Discharge from the rectum or anus
- Swelling or inflammation
- Warts or blisters in the genital area and around the anus
- Abdominal pain

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I VISIT A CLINIC?

Testing and treatment for STIs is free and confidential in the UK, including for those under 16. Health professionals won't tell anyone about your visit unless they think you're at serious risk of harm. First, the doctor or nurse will ask you some questions to determine which tests you need to have. These questions include:

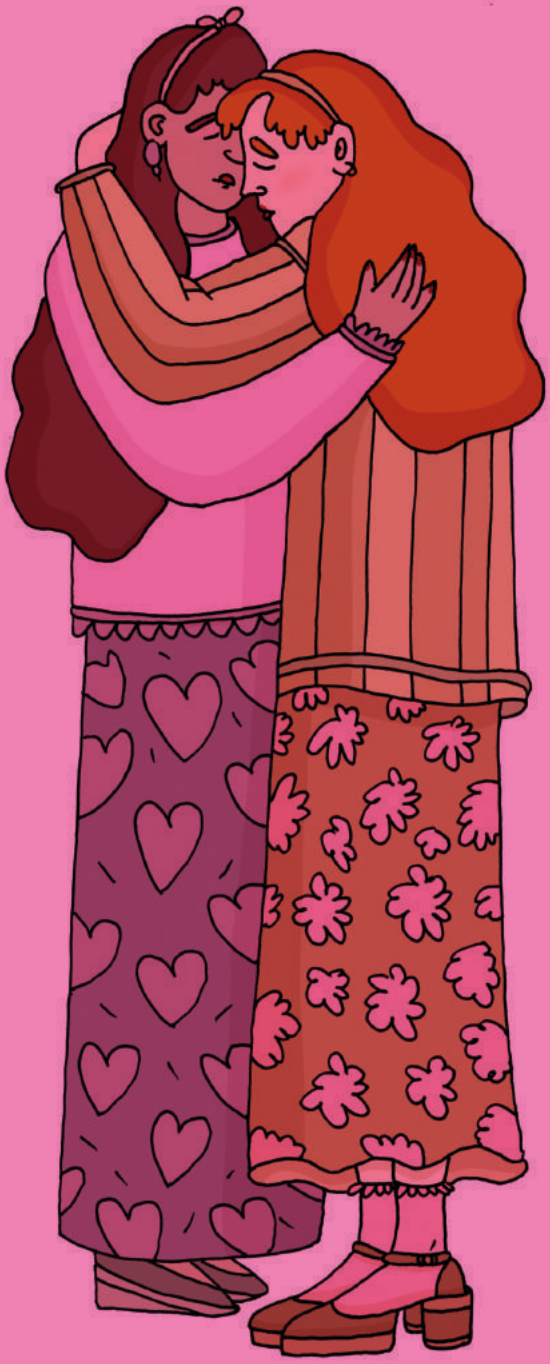
- when did you last have sex?
- have you had unprotected sex?
- do you have any symptoms?

It's important to answer honestly so that your doctor can give you the right treatment. Remember there's no need to be embarrassed as they've seen and heard it all before! You also have the right to ask questions and receive answers. If you feel uncomfortable with a particular doctor or nurse or your questions are being ignored or dismissed, you also have a right to seek out another GP or clinic. Depending on your answers and/or your symptoms, STI tests might involve: giving a urine or a blood sample, taking swabs from the urethra or vagina, and an examination of your genitals.



chapter 8

PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE

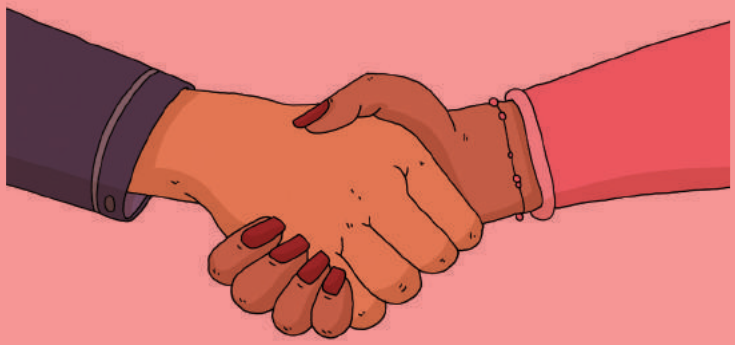


WHAT IS GENDER EQUALITY?

Gender equality is a fundamental human right. Yet despite immense progress, women and girls around the world are still facing inequality in multiple ways. With regard to sexual health, you should have the right to:

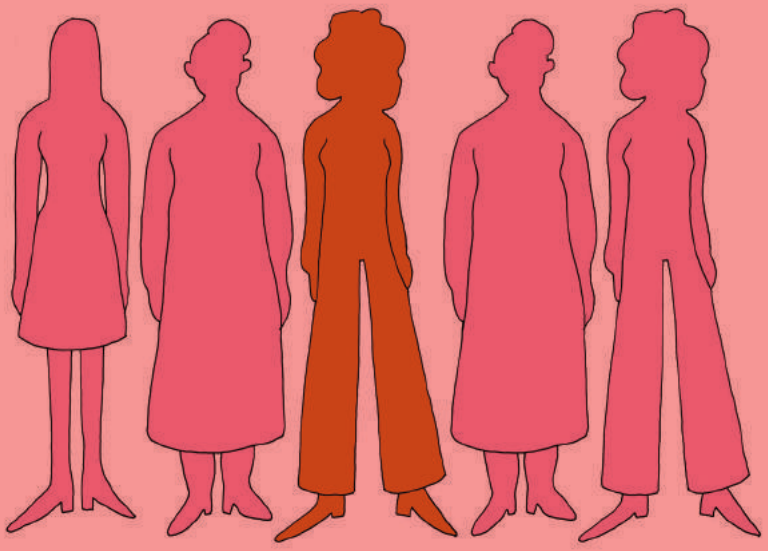
- make decisions about your own body
- have access to adequate sexual health education as well as sexual and reproductive healthcare services
- decide if and when you want to have sex
- choose if, when and who to marry
- decide if and when you want to have children

EQUALITY ALSO MEANS LIVING A LIFE FREE FROM ALL FORMS OF VIOLENCE.



Forms of Violence

Violence against girls and women takes many forms. Often, when we hear about violence, we imagine physical violence—hitting, kicking, beating, bruising, or sexual violence such as assault or rape. Abuse and violence can happen in relationships, in families and between strangers. According to UN Women, around 35% of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual violence inflicted by a partner or non-partner at some point in their lives. However, violence can also be psychological, involving mental and emotional abuse, or economic, such as controlling your income. Just because there are no physical signs, it doesn't make it less scary or damaging.



WHAT IS SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND VIOLENCE?



Sexual harassment is any unwelcome sexual behaviour. It can be written, verbal or physical, it can happen in person or online, and it can be one-off or continuous. Common forms of sexual harassment include:

- someone touching or groping you without your consent
- receiving unwanted text messages, videos or pictures of a sexual nature i.e. they might ask you to send nude pictures or make comments about your body
- being offered rewards in return of sexual favours
- someone pressuring you to do sexual things you don't want to
- someone staring at your body inappropriately
- someone making sexual jokes, comments or gestures



If harassment becomes physical, forceful or develops into threats, then it can be classed as sexual assault, abuse or violence. This includes any kind of unwanted sexual contact, rape (sex without your consent), touching (without consent), online grooming, domestic abuse or sexual exploitation.



There are many more examples of harassment, but the common theme between them all is that it makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe physically and/or emotionally.

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE?

This type of violence can be harder to recognise. Psychological or emotional abuse includes:

- being devalued or humiliated in front of others or when you are alone
- being insulted or attacked verbally
- damage to your self-esteem or emotional wellbeing
- being controlled in any way (such as not being allowed to see friends or family)
- being intimidated or threatened
- being ignored, isolated or rejected

The main feature is the **recurrence** of abuse within or outside the family or relationship.





WHOM To contAct

If you feel that someone is trying to control you in any way, makes you feel bad about yourself, isolates you from the rest of the world or harms you physically or sexually, you must seek help. The same applies, if you think this is happening to a friend or family member. Visit **brook.org.uk/topics/abuse-and-violence** for more information and where to get support.



Other useful contacts in the UK

Refuge: A free 24-hour national domestic abuse helpline
0808 2000 247

Rape Crisis: A national helpline open between 12:00 – 14:30 pm and 19:00 – 21:30 pm every day of the year
0808 802 9999

Lifecentre: Helpline **0808 802 0808**, **or text 07717 989 022**

NSPCC: The helpline is open Monday to Friday 8 am – 10 pm and 9 am – 6 pm on the weekend. Call **0808 800 5000**



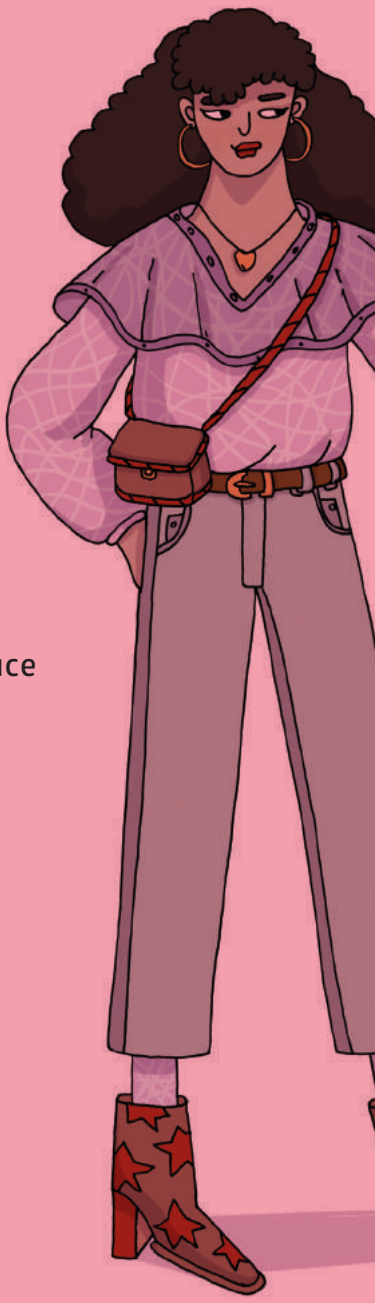
Chapter 9

How to Get Involved in the Sexual Health Movement


MY BODY, MY CHOICE
VAGINA MATTERS
GIRL

Be a sex positive ambassador!

Without comprehensive sex education in schools, it usually takes years (decades even) to understand your body, how it works, and how to engage in a healthy sexual relationship. Currently, we learn mainly through trial and error. Let's reduce the sex education gap together! **Be a sex positive ambassador by supporting a culture of curiosity towards all sex education issues that are crucial to your growth and self-understanding.**





WHAT IS FEMINISM?

Feminism means different things to different people. The foundation of feminism is that all genders should have equal rights and opportunities. It's about respecting all women's experiences and identities, and empowering them to advocate for their rights. This includes closing the gender gap in a number of fields, and making sure that all women and girls have access to the same opportunities as those available to men and boys. It also means challenging traditional norms of what it means to be a man, some elements of which can be damaging to men and negatively affect their relationships and mental health. Remember anyone can be a feminist!

Feminism and sex ed

In many countries, sex ed is not part of the official school curriculum. It's vital that it is as it increases young people's knowledge of sexual and reproductive health and keeps them safe. Contrary to popular belief, teaching young people about safer sex does not promote early sexual activity, it actually encourages them to have sex for the first time much later on. With *Vagina Matters*, we wanted to focus on highlighting the diverse experiences of women and girls as we felt that the lack of sex ed negatively affects their relationship with themselves and their life choices — in particular, their experience with unwanted teenage pregnancies and abortions.

Traditional sex education often focuses on the risks, such as STIs and staying safe online, leaving out important conversations about body image and pleasure, healthy relationships, sex and consent, partner communication, as well as recognising violence and harassment.

Feminism in sex education means continuing to fight against social stereotypes—and speaking freely about your body, menstruation, or sexual health. Knowledge is power, and the better we know our bodies, the more prepared and confident we will be to take on the world and all its challenges.





Everyone needs to know and understand their body in order to be healthy and happy. If you're wondering how to achieve this goal, here are some ideas:

- **Set up a sex education group at your school or university.** Organise discussions and distribute helpful information for students at your school! (For free resources visit brook.org.uk/resources).
- **Organise a campaign to collect period products** to donate to youth centres, community centres, crisis centres, homeless shelters, organisations working with minority groups, and refugee centres. This will help people who have difficulty accessing period care.
- **Change the policy at your school or university** to stock pads or tampons in the bathrooms so they're accessible to everyone who needs them.
- **Organise meetings with younger students** to talk to them about their bodies, their first period, or their first sexual experience and everything else they may be curious about!

Do you need additional information?

This book is just an introduction to sexual health and doesn't provide detailed explanations for everything you may want to know. For additional help and support visit Brook's website at **www.brook.org.uk**.







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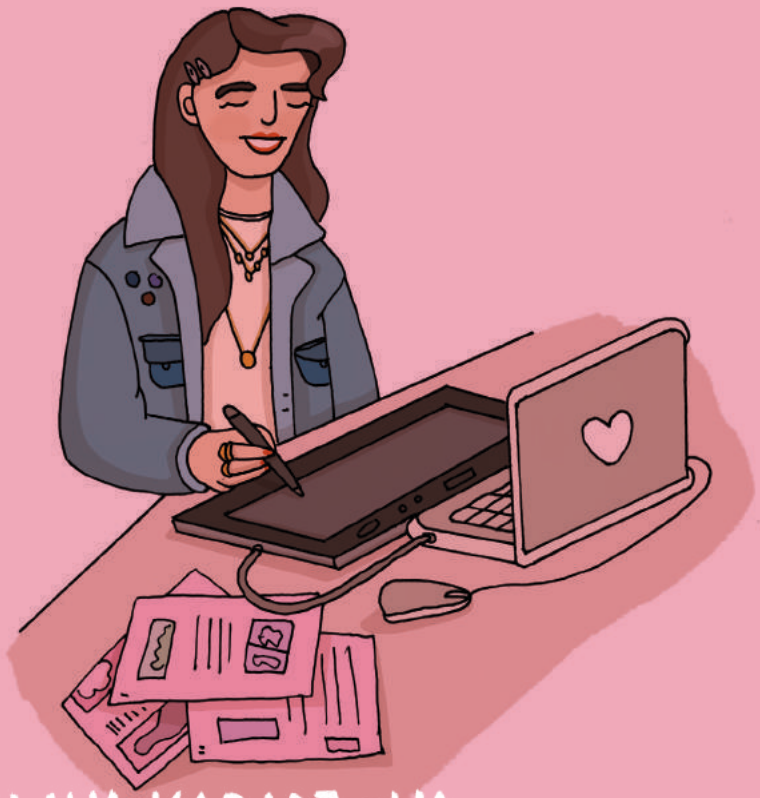
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