



For Your Health

## TOP TEN REASONS TO GET TO KNOW YOURSELF!

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### 1. Know the parts.

First, you should know what is normal and healthy, including the proper names of your anatomy since “down there” often just doesn’t cut it. Know the difference between your vagina, vulva, labia – the terms will come in handy when you call your doctor with a potential problem.

### 2. Know YOUR parts.

Once you know the vocabulary, learn what is normal for YOU – we do not all look the same! Make sure your doctor tells you at your next exam if everything is ok – then look and remember – you will have something to compare to if there is a change.

### 3. Stop that itch!

Vaginal and vulvar itching and burning are extremely common and are among the primary reasons for women’s visits to their doctor. From contact dermatitis (skin allergy) to vulvar candidiasis (external skin yeast infections) to vulvar dystrophy (skin thickening), vulvar itching can have different reasons and require different treatments. Once you are able to describe the location and appearance of your symptoms, your doctor can determine if you need to be seen by her right away.

### 4. Relax when you have normal discharge...

All women have vaginal discharge at times. It can be perfectly normal, varying from clear and stretchy to thick and glue-like with different phases of the menstrual cycle. The difference can even help to identify if you are in your “high fertility” phase and the time is right to conceive (but don’t rely on it for birth control)! Normal discharge should not have an odor and should not cause irritation.

### 5. ...and get treatment when it’s not.

Some discharge can be a sign of a vaginal infection that requires treatment. Yeast infections (thick, white, cottage-cheese like), bacterial infections such as bacterial vaginosis (BV – thin, grey or white, with fish-like odor), or trichomoniasis (an STD that results in copious, greenish, smelly discharge) all have different treatments, so don’t assume that everything can be cured with an over the counter yeast cream. Look and talk with your doctor – if it is your first yeast infection or anything resembling the other two – don’t waste your time or money, you will need an exam.

### 6. Figure out “the bumps” I

It is very common to find a “bump” on the vulva or labia. Don’t hit the panic button just yet though – many nodules in that area are quite benign. Some, like old skin tags or moles, don’t need any treatment usually (unless they change in size or color). Others, like folliculitis (infected hair follicles which look like acne) or razor burn (painful red dots where hairs were previously), may just need a warm bath, a change in your grooming routine, or at most antibiotics.

### 7. Figure out “the bumps” II

Other “lumps and bumps” need attention ASAP. If you find painful blisters (a sign of possible herpes), ulcers (associated with syphilis), or cauliflower-like growths (which may represent external genital warts or HPV), don’t ignore them - see your doctor right away!

### 8. Realize there is more to it.

Discomfort in your intimate area sometimes may not have anything to do your vulva or vagina. Hemorrhoids and anal fissures (painful cuts in the skin around the anal opening) happen, and may require a medical evaluation.

### 9. Look your best

Shaving vs waxing? All off or au naturelle? There is no one perfect way of personal grooming. Seeing the area in question for yourself can help you achieve the intimate style YOU want. And looking YOUR best, whatever that may mean, will help maintain a healthy body image.

### 10. Partner up with your ob/gyn

Self-examination and self knowledge can allow you to take a greater part in your own care. By accurately describing what you feel and what you see, your doctor will be better able to see you in the right time frame and, if appropriate, recommend the right treatment (or no treatment) in meantime.