

Douching

Douching is washing or cleaning out the vagina with water or other mixtures of fluids. Most douches are sold in stores as prepackaged mixes of water and vinegar, baking soda, or iodine. The mixtures usually come in a bottle or bag. You squirt the douche upward through a tube or nozzle into your vagina. In the United States, about one in four women 15 to 44 years old douche.

Q: Why should women not douche?

A: Most doctors recommend that women don't douche. Douching can change the necessary balance of vaginal flora (bacteria that live in the vagina) and natural acidity in a healthy vagina.

A healthy vagina has good and harmful bacteria. The balance of bacteria helps maintain an acidic environment. The acidic environment protects the vagina from infections or irritation.

Q: What health problems are linked to douching?

A: Health problems linked to douching include:

- Bacterial vaginosis, which is an infection in the vagina. Women who douche often (once a week) are five times more likely to develop bacterial vaginosis than women who do not douche.
- Pelvic inflammatory disease, an infection in the reproductive organs that is often caused by a sexually transmitted infection (STI)
- Problems during pregnancy, including preterm birth and ectopic pregnancy
- STIs, including HIV
- Vaginal irritation or dryness

Q: Should I douche to get rid of vaginal odor or other problems?

A: No. You should not douche to try to get rid of vaginal odor or other vaginal problems like discharge, pain, itching, or burning. Douching will only cover up odor for a short time and will make other problems worse. Call your doctor or nurse if you have:

- Vaginal discharge that smells bad
- Vaginal itching and thick, white or yellowish-green discharge with or without an odor
- Burning, redness, and swelling in or around the vagina
- Pain when urinating
- Pain or discomfort during sex

These may be signs of a vaginal infection or an STI. Do not douche before seeing your doctor or nurse. This can make it hard for the doctor or nurse to find out what may be wrong.

Q: What is the best way to clean my vagina?

A: It is best to let your vagina clean itself. The vagina cleans itself naturally by making mucus. The mucus washes away blood, semen, and vaginal discharge.

If you are worried about vaginal odor, talk to your doctor or nurse. But you should know that even healthy, clean vaginas have a mild odor that changes throughout the day. Physical activity also can give your vagina a stronger, muskier scent, but this is still normal.

Keep your vagina clean and healthy by washing the outside of your vagina with warm water when you bathe. You also should avoid scented tampons, pads, powders, and sprays. These products may increase your chances of getting a vaginal infection.

Q: Can douching before or after sex prevent STIs?

A: No. Douching before or after sex does not prevent STIs. In fact, douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protect you from infection. This can actually increase your risk of getting STIs.

Q: Can douching after sex stop me from getting pregnant?

A: No. Douching does not prevent pregnancy. It should never be used for birth control.

Q: How does douching affect pregnancy?

A: Douching can make it harder to get pregnant and can cause problems during pregnancy:

- **Trouble getting pregnant.** Women who douched at least once a month had a harder time getting pregnant than those women who did not douche.
- **Higher risk of ectopic pregnancy.** Douching can raise your risk for damaged fallopian tubes and ectopic pregnancy. Ectopic pregnancy is when the fertilized egg attaches to the inside of the fallopian tube instead of the uterus. If left untreated, ectopic pregnancy can be life-threatening. It can also make it hard for a woman to get pregnant in the future.
- **Higher risk of early childbirth.** Douching raises your risk for premature birth. One study found that women who douched during pregnancy were more likely to deliver their babies early. This raises the risk for health problems for you and your baby.

For more information...

For more information about douching, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG)

202-638-5577 • www.acog.org

Planned Parenthood

800-230-7526 • www.plannedparenthood.org

This fact sheet was reviewed by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) staff.

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Content last updated: January 19, 2015.

Content last reviewed: November 19, 2014.



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