



Your A-to-Z Guide to
Periods, Piercings, Pleasures
and so much more

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V
Is for
Vagina

Alyssa Dweck, MS, MD, FACOG and Robin Westen

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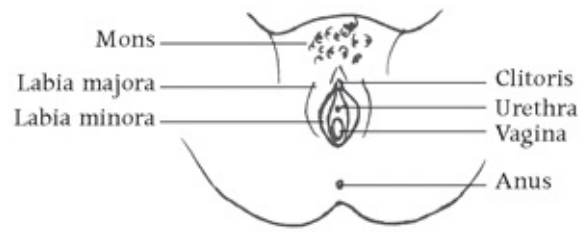
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To Evan, my husband. You are my rock.

—Alyssa Dweck, MD

As always to my husband, Howie, my mentor, friend, and lover—and to sister goddesses everywhere.

—Robin Westen



Introduction

Vaginas. I've seen thousands of them. As a full-time practicing OB/GYN for almost two decades, I've learned women have a complex relationship with their V. Whether curious, closed, excited, elated, tenacious, mortified, tearful, or fearful, shy, panicked, pugnacious, even petrified, women first and foremost all want to know one thing: Am I normal down there?

This essential question is the reason that I'm Facebooked frequently, cornered in the grocery store aisle, sidelined at the gym, questioned in cafés, and stopped on the street by women who have urgent issues about their vaginas. Their queries and concerns inspired me to write *V Is for Vagina*. Rather than talk yeast infections in the produce aisle or labioplasty on the elliptical machine, I wanted to get the word out, to educate women in an easy-to-read, nonthreatening, down-to-earth way. I wanted to share medically sound and up-to-date information in a humorous, hip, and relaxed style. And I wanted to have a little fun, too.

So, here it is, *V Is for Vagina*: a humorous but informative guide to the sometimes mysterious but always fascinating and amazing VAGINA. Some of the chapters ahead are more "medical," while others are chatty and lighthearted. There's material that may embarrass some readers, even offend others. But please be assured that all of the information is solid and stems from the experiences I've been fortunate enough to share with my patients over the years. Nothing, and I mean nothing, surprises me anymore. Truly, I've heard it all.

You can either use *V Is for Vagina* as a reference guide to answer your individual questions or take the quiz at the beginning of the book to figure out where you stand in general V knowledge. From there, you can fill in the blanks by reading those sections that need clarification. It's also a great companion to take along for a women's day out with your BFFs. I only suggest you keep your voice down if you're in public. Even uttering the word vagina can quickly draw the attention of strangers! And moms, this guide can help you explain the basics to your young daughters in a heart-centered and nonscary way.

This to my mind is the vagina as icon,
Sacred, inviolable, worshipped.
The sister and source
From which all human life springs.
—Catherine Blackledge

But of course, never substitute the information in this book for a visit with your gynecologist if you still have questions—or need medical attention.

Ready for the inside scoop on your lovely V?
Please read, laugh, and learn ...

Let's Have a Party: The Vagina Is Coming Out!

Just as women's bodies are softer than men's, so their understanding is sharper.

—Christine de Pisan

OUR V: It's the subject of girl talk over coffee, blabbed about on Grey's Anatomy, discussed by Oprah, described on Curb Your Enthusiasm, joked over on Bill Maher, rapped on by Lil Wayne, mocked in Date Night, enjoyed on Sex and the City, painted on canvas, represented in caves, sculpted into walls, monologued on Broadway, banned, beautified, deified, pierced, waxed, creamed, oiled, stretched, tightened, tattooed, glorified, despised, and mythologized. There are over one thousand slang words for it (who-ha, vajayjay, cha-cha, lady flower, foo foo, coochie, noonie, love clam, twinkle, quim, the love canal, the great gorge, pink, pussy, salmon canyon, and oasis, to name just a few). You can order mugs, T-shirts, songs, poems, pens, pencils, sculptures, paintings, posters, and magnets with the word vagina in, over, or on them.

And suddenly there seems to be a market for putting the va-va-voom back in the vajayjay. The number of women undergoing cosmetic surgery to improve its function and appearance—tighten the V, sculpt the labia, or restore the hymen—has gone up dramatically in the last few years, making them procedure the fastest growing in the country. Spas in New York, L.A., D.C., and elsewhere offer “vagina rejuvenation,” everything from irrigating the vaginal passage, slipping in “breath” mint, or massaging the clit to boost its sensitivity, to applying tightening cream that promises to reduce its appearance to a “youthful” state for a full twenty-four hours. Think Cinderella having a ball!

Yet, despite all the attention, most of us know squat about our salmon canyon. For example, Summer's Eve, a women's hygiene product, recently surveyed sisters from all backgrounds across the United States and found that nearly 70 percent of women asked cannot identify five major parts of their female genitalia, and nearly 60 percent struggle with unresolved feelings just about the word vagina.

Need more evidence that when it comes to our lovely V's we're in the dark but want and need to be brought into the light? Consider these stats from the Association of Reproductive Professionals:

- While women perform breast self-exams regularly, only half (49%) surveyed have ever performed a self-exam of their vaginas. Twenty-four percent have not looked at their vagina in a year or longer. HOW SAD.
- Two-thirds of women (65%) concur that vaginal health and research have not received the proper attention they deserve. AGREED.
- More than half of the women surveyed (59%) say that society has too many misconceptions about vaginas. TOTALLY.

- Ninety percent of women agree that it's important for women to be sufficiently educated about the vagina. HELLO ... THAT'S WHY I'M HERE.
- Nearly three in four women surveyed (73%) believe that the vagina is still a shocking topic. GULP.
- Some women consider their vaginas "ugly," "gross," "dirty," and "embarrassing." LET ME SAY THIS RIGHT NOW—THIS HAS GOT TO STOP.
- Only half of the women surveyed (51%) consider themselves to be extremely/very knowledgeable about their vaginas. LET'S CHANGE THAT!

The good news is this: Times are changing, fast and furiously. After all, just in the past few years, women have had to deal with plenty of new and different issues, including infections from the oh-so-popular and bare-it-all Brazilian waxing piercings gone awry, tattoos run amok, and irritation from speed-breaking spinning classes. There are updates on estrogen replacement; a controversial vaccine to protect young girls from getting genital warts and cervical cancer; the redesign of tampons and pads; a host of new and ultratitillating sex toys; the current vajazzling craze; updated consideration on vitamins and soy; new treatments for vulvodynia, the vaginal pain syndrome thousands of women suffer from; and OMG, so much more. Plus, sex researchers have discovered the "A spot," which some claim one-ups the "G spot" for guaranteeing over-the-top orgasmic pleasure.

For women the best aphrodisiacs are words. The G spot is in the ears. He who looks for it below there is wasting his time.

—Isabel Allende

Yes, women crave the inside scoop on their quims. Maybe that's why Google has over 21 million entries for vagina. We want to be in on the latest everything about everything, from self-exams, tampons, Pap tests, cunnilingus, allergies, birth control, yeast infections, and semen allergies to ingrown pubic hairs, Kegels, lubricant, and more... much more.

But first things first: Let's take a look through the cultural kaleidoscope of the vagina because the vagina deserves a historical view. After all, everybody begins with the vagina in some way: You were conceived and born, right? Or as Catherine Blackledge, author of the comprehensive *The Story of V*, writes: "The vagina is the seat of female sexual pleasure, the site of the creation of humankind and the channel for its birth."

The self-proclaimed feminist author Naomi Wolf sees our cha-cha from a historical perspective:

The way we understand and envision the vagina at certain moments in history is a metaphor for how we are willing to see women in general and how women are encouraged to see themselves. From the Greeks and the Romans to Freud, from pornography and health to goddesses, from worship to denigration and even mutilation, there is a history of this wonderful organ, the "dark continent" of female sexuality, well deserving of its own story.

True, the historical, artistic, and literary record of our who-has is awesome, ~~mirroring our culture's view of sexuality.~~ Before the nineteenth century, terms for the V were affectionate and kind. Even the word cunt, one of the oldest words for female genitalia, was intended to mean something warm and cuddly. In fact, before the fifteenth century, cunt was just another word, so much a part of everyday vocabulary that it was used in naming public streets. Around 1230, for example, there was a London street called Gropecuntelane, and in Paris there was a Rue Grateecon, which translates as "Scratchcunt Street." But after the fifteenth century, cunt was totally taboo. In England it was forbidden in speech and print, and it was a legal offense to publish the word.

Dear Kitty:

I'd like to ask Peter whether he knows what girls look like down there. I don't think boys are as complicated as girls. You can easily see what boys look like in photographs or pictures of male nudes, but with women, it's different. In women, the genitalia, or whatever they're called, are hidden between their legs...

—Anne Frank's diary

But get this: The much tamer word, vagina, is still illegal to use in the United States in commercials, even when the product being hawked is a tampon! That's the goodness this uptight, V-dissing perspective isn't the whole story. In fact, throughout history, cultures all over the world have at times celebrated the gorgeous, glorious lady flower. Vagina art can be found in archaic statuettes, amulets, and figurines, as well as carved on seals and jewelry, and in sculptures, installations, and paintings in our modern museums.

Way back in the Paleolithic era, images of vulvas were painted or carved and emblazoned on various Stone Age sites in France, Spain, Russia, and other locations. Perhaps one of the most striking views of the V can be seen on the wall of a cave in Vienne, France. Here a trinity of vulvas was carved on the rock surface as far back as seventeen thousand years ago!

Then in 1896 German archaeologists discovered a temple site in Turkey dating back to the fifth century BCE, and within it were seven petite terra-cotta female figurines. What makes them so fantabulous is the artist created these little sculptures such that the face, stomach, and genitals merge into one image. Indeed they are, without dispute, total vulva women.

But these little gals won't take the proverbial Honey Pot Award for most outstanding vulva. That may go to a figurine dating back to between twenty-one thousand and twenty-three thousand years ago, carved out of limonite and found in southern France. This Venus figurine displays a huge, curved oval vulva that is slit right down the center.

Some of the oldest examples of skirt-lifting and vulva-revealing images date from fourteen thousand years ago and are found on a Syrian cylinder seal. One can easily see three women either spreading their legs wide or lifting their clothes to reveal with pride and without prejudice their impressive V's.

Historians say it's amazing that these kinds of vulvanic works of art survived

considering that by the seventeenth century so many were ordered hidden, destroyed, buried, or burned.

African culture was slow to condemn V exposure. As recently as the twentieth century, a common shaming gesture in plenty of African societies was exposing the vulva, as if to say “Hey, don’t forget where you came from, buddy.”

In other parts of the world, vulvas created by natural rock formations are still venerated. For instance, in Japan, parents encourage their children to play near rocks that resemble genitals. Especially renowned is a group of formations in Kyushu. It’s believed these shapes offer good luck and health to anyone within their vicinity. Same goes in Thailand on the island of Koah Samui. Two natural vulva rock formations in the cliffs overlooking the sea are used as a place not only of prayer but of pilgrimage as well. Tourists who visit the sexy formations in the morning hours will see native Thais leaving flower offerings on the sacred spot.

The Sanskrit word for vagina is yoni, meaning womb, origin, source, and universe.

And let’s not forget the V-loving ancient Egyptians. They focused on the downward-pointing triangle shape and made it the symbol of sacred creativity. Perhaps that’s why the entrance to the queen’s chamber in the pyramid of Cheops is indicated by a downward-pointing triangle. BTW: If you could exam it, the same triangle is seen in the interior structure of the uterus. And, not to be left out, Tantric lore also expresses the vagina as the entrance to the past as well as the future.

Speaking of interior views, the famous Taoist text “The Wondrous Discourse of Su Nu” explains how vaginas come in eight varieties and sizes. From smallest to largest, they are known as:

- The Zither or Lute String
- The Water-caltrop Teeth or Water-chestnut Teeth
- The Peaceful Valley or Little Stream
- The Dark or Mysterious Pearl
- The Valley Seed or Valley Proper
- The Palace of Delight or Deep Chamber
- The Inner Door or Gate of Prosperity
- The North Pole

Reiner de Graaf, who was a brilliant sixteenth-century Dutch physician, anatomist, and admirer of the V, made major discoveries in reproductive biology. He was effusive and poetic about the vagina’s ability to be the perfect hostess. Go this:

The woman’s vagina is so cleverly constructed that it will accommodate itself to each and every penis; it will go out to meet a short one, retire before a long one, dilate for a fat one, and constrict for a thin one. Nature has taken account every variety of penis, and so there is no need solicitous to seek a scabbard the same size as your knife.... Every man can thus come together with every woman and every woman with every man.

With this understanding in mind, it's not surprising vibrators took off at home as well as in the doc's office. Even in the uptight United States, as early as the 1890s women could purchase a \$5 portable vibrator advertised as "perfect for weekend trips" instead of paying their doctor \$2 a visit to stimulate the clitoris until reaching orgasm. Hmmm ... not sure if that would be covered under insurance today.

But there's no doubt the vagina is versatile. Today extraordinary muscle control can be witnessed mostly during sex industry shows. Smoking cigarettes, firing Ping-Pong balls, writing messages, opening bottles, and picking up sushi with chopsticks are just a few of the many tricks of the trade.

Sadly though, in some cultures, there's no celebration of the V's versatility and ability to feel pleasure. Whether it's called female genital cutting, female circumcision, female genital mutilation, or cliterectomy, it's a surgical procedure ranging from drawing blood to removing the clitoris by itself, to removing the external genitals, joining the sides, and leaving a small opening. This horrendous practice dates to ancient times; usually performed on young girls and in a ritual context, it's purported by its practitioners to guard a girl's virginity and reduce her sexual desires. Because it's usually undertaken in unhygienic conditions, even today, cutting may lead to severe bleeding, infection, debilitating pain, and death. The long-term consequences of this barbaric practice can include an inability to urinate or expel menstrual blood, pain during sexual intercourse, and prolonged childbirth.

Let's Get Sentimental: The Romans borrowed Eros from the Greeks and named him Cupid. Eros has been depicted in art in many ways. The Romans regarded him as a symbol of life after death, and the Greeks put him everywhere from drinking vessels to oil flasks, usually showing him ready to fire an arrow into the heart of an unsuspecting "victim."

Rather than end this section on a sad note, let's celebrate our amazing cha-ch with modern literary and art works. This book would not be complete without giving kudos to Eve Ensler, author of the iconic work *The Vagina Monologues*. Ensler, who brought the vagina right out of the genital closet, interviews a diverse group of over two hundred women about their vaginas: young and old; married and single; heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian; working-class women, professional women, and sex workers; women of various ethnicities. As the author points out, some of the monologues are verbatim, some are composites, and some are her invented impressions. The subjects, which all have to do with vaginas, include such topics as what a vagina looks like, what goes in and comes out of vaginas, menstruation and birth, and more playfully, "If your vagina got dressed what would it wear?" or "If your vagina could talk, what would it say, in two words?"

Breaking the vagina visual art barrier was the feminist artist Judy Chicago with her groundbreaking work *The Dinner Party*, an installation of ceramic vagina place settings representing thirty-nine mythical and historical famous women, produced from 1974 to 1979. Despite art-world resistance to her vagina theme,

toured sixteen venues in six countries on three continents to a viewing audience of 1 million. Since 2007 it's been on permanent exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York City.

More recently, there's the quim work by Jamie McCartney, an artist from Brighton, UK. McCartney convinced over four hundred women, ages ranging from eighteen to seventy-six, to spread their legs so he could make a plaster cast of their vaginas and vulvas and display them en masse. McCartney's socially-conscious installation was five years in the making. Included in his piece are mothers and daughters, identical twins, transgendered men and women, as well as a woman pre- and postnatal and another pre- and postlabioplasty. McCartney's work uses shock, humor, and spectacle—ultimately educating people about what normal women really look like.

Hallelujah!

How Much Do You Know About Your V?

Test Your V Knowledge

1. How many women won't have an orgasm with intercourse alone?
 - a. 10 percent
 - b. 50 percent
 - c. 75 percent
2. Who discovered the G spot?
 - a. Walt Disney. It's make-believe.
 - b. Helen Gurley Brown, iconic editor of Cosmopolitan magazine.
 - c. Ernst Grafenberg, a German gynecologist.
3. Why is it okay to have sex during pregnancy?
 - a. You wouldn't be horny if it weren't.
 - b. The baby is protected within the uterus, cushioned by fluid.
 - c. It's not! Abstain!
4. The morning-after pill is:
 - a. A modern contraceptive method.
 - b. A treatment to prevent pregnancy after unprotected sex.
 - c. Only a dream.
5. Yeast infections can be caused by:
 - a. Wearing panty liners.
 - b. Taking antibiotics.
 - c. Both of the above.
6. What can you do if you believe your labia are too "fat"?
 - a. Consider (carefully) labioplasty.
 - b. Do special labia exercises.
 - c. Go on a diet and you'll lose weight down there, too.
7. What is the "Transition Zone"?
 - a. The end of fertility and the start of menopause.
 - b. An area of the cervix where squamous and glandular cells meet.
 - c. A one-way ticket to incredible orgasms.
8. Who doesn't need a Pap smear?
 - a. Women who are younger than sixteen and have not had sexual intercourse.
 - b. Most women between the ages of thirty and forty.
 - c. Women who have had a hysterectomy and kept their cervix.
9. What are vulvar skin tags?
 - a. A potential sign of cancer. See your doctor immediately.
 - b. Outgrowths of normal skin. No worries.
 - c. Smooth white bumps under the surface of your vulva's skin.
10. What's a common cause of low sex drive?
 - a. Sugar
 - b. Exercise
 - c. Poor body image
11. What helps reduce the pain after a bikini wax?
 - a. Don't tan down there for twenty-four hours before and after the

procedure.

b. Wearing Spanx.

c. Getting weekly waxes.

12. What's the most popular place to pierce the vagina?

a. Inner labia

b. Clitoral hood

c. Outer labia

13. Who made "vajazzling" famous?

a. Carrie Bradshaw

b. Jennifer Love Hewitt

c. Lady Gaga

14. To keep your lady flower lovely:

a. Douche frequently.

b. Take bubble baths.

c. Wear cotton underwear (or go commando).

15. Can women get addicted to porn?

a. No way!

b. Yes! Duh.

c. Porn addiction in women is rare.

16. Both gonorrhea and chlamydia are treated with:

a. Antibiotics

b. Douching

c. Abstinence

17. What can relieve menstrual cramps?

a. Chocolate

b. Sex

c. Aerobics

18. Many women going through menopause experience:

a. Hot flashes

b. Cramps

c. Weight loss

19. A woman trying to get pregnant should have intercourse:

a. On days one to four of a twenty-eight-day cycle.

b. Only on day fourteen of a twenty-eight-day cycle.

c. Depending on your cycle length, around ovulation, approximately days ten to nineteen.

20. Tampons have been linked to which of the following diseases:

a. HIV

b. Toxic shock syndrome

c. Cervical cancer

21. What is a leading cause of infertility?

a. Sexually transmitted diseases

b. Psychological problems

c. Lack of physical activity

22. If you notice a pinpoint hole in your diaphragm you should:

- a. Plug it up with contraceptive gel.
 - b. Get a new diaphragm.
 - c. Do nothing; it's unlikely that sperm will get through.
-
23. During perimenopause, you should continue using some sort of contraception:
- a. Until you skip a period.
 - b. Until it's been a full year without your period.
 - c. You don't need birth control during perimenopause.
24. The following is true about HPV:
- a. You're fully protected from transmission by using a condom.
 - b. It's an uncommon virus, and even if you've had only two or three sex partners in your lifetime, you're unlikely to get it.
 - c. In most instances, HPV will not lead to cervical cancer.
25. A colposcopy is:
- a. A form of birth control.
 - b. A microscopic exam of the cervix to check for abnormal cells.
 - c. A new gynecological app for your iPhone.
26. A Bartholin's cyst can be treated in all of the following ways except:
- a. Warm soaks, pain medication, and drainage.
 - b. Leaving it alone; it may go away by itself.
 - c. Having a lot of sex so it'll pop.
27. You can prevent a urinary tract infection by all the following except:
- a. Wiping from front to back after going to the bathroom.
 - b. Holding in your urine all day.
 - c. Urinating before and after sex.
28. True or False: Vaginal discharge is always a yeast infection.
29. True or False: Low libido has one cause, low hormone levels, and a simple pill will cure it.
30. True or False: Bleeding from the rectum is always due to hemorrhoids; evaluation is really not needed.
31. True or False: You can get genital herpes from oral sex.
32. True or False: The birth control pill offers protection against ovarian and uterine cancers.

Your V Score

Give yourself five points for each correct answer. Then total the score and read the analysis below to find out how much you really know about all things V!

1. C	9. B	17. B	25. B
2. C	10. C	18. A	26. A
3. B	11. A	19. C	27. B
4. B	12. B	20. B	28. F
5. C	13. B	21. A	29. F
6. A	14. C	22. B	30. F
7. B	15. B	23. B	31. T
8. A	16. A	24. C	32. T

If You Scored between 140 and 160 Points

Congratulations, sister! You have above-average knowledge about your V as well as other areas of your femme health. This will not only serve your physical, emotional, and sexual needs but probably make you the go-to confidante to all your girlfriends who are feeling a little unsure about their lady flowers. But hold that bouquet! Sometimes being a know-it-all keeps women away from appointments they should make, especially an annual examination with their gynecologist. A smart, well-read, and savvy woman like you should remember to seek help when a problem arises. It's the perfect way to put your V knowledge to good use.

sample content of V is for Vagina: Your A to Z Guide to Periods, Piercings, Pleasures, and so much more

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