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The National Women's Health Information Center

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Frequently Asked Questions about Douching

What is douching?

Douching is rinsing or cleaning out the vagina (also called the birth canal) by squirting water or other solutions (such as vinegar, baking soda, or douching solutions you can buy at drug and grocery stores) into the vagina. The water or solutions are held in a bottle and squirted into the vagina through tubing and a nozzle.

Why do women douche?

Douching is a practice that is thought to have been around since ancient times. Reasons women have given for using douches include to: rinse away blood after a menstrual period; clean the vagina after sex to avoid sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and wash away semen to prevent pregnancy; and reduce odors.

How common is douching?

Douching is a common practice among women in the United States – 37% of American women between the ages of 15 to 44 douche regularly. Of these women, about half douche on a weekly basis.

Is douching safe?

Health care providers do not recommend douching to clean the vagina. Douching changes the delicate chemical balance in the vagina (and the vaginal flora), which can make a woman more prone to bacterial infections. It also can spread existing vaginal or cervical infections up into the pelvic organs (uterus fallopian tubes, and ovaries).

Research shows that women who douche on a routine basis tend to have more problems than women who do not douche or who rarely douche. These problems include vaginal irritation, infections (called *bacterial vaginosis* or BV), and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Women who douche often are also more at risk for getting *pelvic inflammatory disease* (PID). PID is an infection of a woman's pelvic organs. It is caused by bacteria, which can travel from a woman's vagina and cervix up into her pelvic organs. If left untreated, PID can lead to infertility (not being able to get pregnant) and ectopic pregnancy (pregnancy in the fallopian tube instead of the uterus). Both BV and PID can lead to serious problems during pregnancy, such as infection in the baby, problems with labor, and early delivery.

What effects will douching have on pregnancy?

Douching after sex does not prevent pregnancy. But, research has shown that douching may affect a woman's ability to get pregnant. In women trying to become pregnant, those who douched the most often (more than once per week) had the lowest pregnancy rate. Other research has shown a link between frequent douching and having low birth-weight babies. Studies also show that douching greatly increases the chance of *ectopic pregnancy*, which can be a life-threatening condition. Ectopic pregnancy is when the fertilized egg attaches inside of the fallopian tube instead of in the uterus.

What is the healthiest and safest way to clean the vagina?

Because the chemical balance of the vagina is very sensitive, it is best to let the vagina clean itself. The vagina takes care of cleaning itself naturally through secretions of mucous. Warm water and gentle, unscented soap during the bath or shower is the best way to clean the outside areas of the vagina. Products like feminine hygiene soaps, powders and sprays are not necessary, and may be harmful.

It is important to see your health care provider right away when you have any vaginal pain, itching, burning, or a foul odor; pain when urinating; a vaginal discharge that is not normal, such as thick and white (like cottage cheese) or yellowish-green. You may have a yeast infection, urinary tract infection, or bacterial infection, all of which can be treated. Do not clean the vagina or douche before an exam with a health care provider. This will wash away the vaginal discharge, which helps the health care provider to determine the type of infection.

For More Information...

You can find out more about douching by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at (800) 994-WOMAN (9662) or the following organizations:

Food and Drug Administration

Phone Number(s): (888) 463-6332

Internet Address: <http://www.fda.gov>

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Phone Number(s): (800) 230-7526

Internet Address: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/>

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) Resource Center

Phone Number(s): (800) 762-2264 x 192 (for publications requests only)

Internet Address: <http://www.acog.org/>

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