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1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Douching

Q: What is douching?

A: The word "douche" means to wash or soak in French. Douching is washing or cleaning out the vagina (birth canal) with water or other mixtures of fluids. Most douches are prepackaged mixes of water and vinegar, baking soda, or iodine. You can buy these products at drug and grocery stores. The mixtures usually come in a bottle and can be squirted into the vagina through a tube or nozzle.

Q: Why do women douche?

A: Women douche because they mistakenly believe it gives many benefits. Women who douche say they do it to:

- Clean the vagina
- Rinse away blood after monthly periods
- Get rid of odor
- Avoid sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Prevent pregnancy

Q: How common is douching?

A: Douching is common among women in the United States. It's estimated that 20 to 40 percent of American women 15 to 44 years old douche regularly. About half of these women douche each week. Higher rates of douching are seen in teens, African-American women, and Hispanic women.

Q: Is douching safe?

A: Most doctors and the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) recommend that women don't douche. Douching can change the delicate balance of vaginal flora (organisms that live in the vagina) and acidity in a healthy vagina. One way to look at it is in a healthy vagina there are both good and bad bacteria. The balance of the good and bad bacteria help maintain an acidic environment. Any changes can cause an over growth of bad bacteria which can lead to a yeast infection or bacterial vaginosis. Plus, if you have a vaginal infection, douching can push the bacteria causing the infection up into the uterus, fallopian (fuh-LOH-pee-uhn) tubes, and ovaries.

Q: What are the dangers linked to douching?

A: Research shows that women who douche regularly have more health problems than women who don't. Doctors are still unsure whether douching causes these problems. Douching may simply be more common in groups of women who tend to have these issues. Health problems linked to douching include:

- Vaginal irritation
- Bacterial vaginosis (vaj-uh-NOH-suhs) (BV)
- STIs
- Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)

Some STIs, BV, and PID can all lead to serious problems during pregnancy. These include infection in the baby, problems with labor, and early delivery.



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Q: Should I douche to clean inside my vagina?

A: No. The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists suggests women avoid douching completely. In most cases the vagina's acidic environment "cleans" the vagina. If there is a strong odor or irritation it usually means something is wrong. Douching can increase your chances of infection. The only time you should douche is when your doctor tells you to.

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

A: Most doctors say it's best to let your vagina clean itself. The vagina cleans itself naturally by making mucous. The mucous washes away blood, semen, and vaginal discharge. You should know that even healthy, clean vaginas may have a mild odor.

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

Q: Should I douche to get rid of vaginal odor, discharge, pain, itching, or burning?

A: No. You should never douche to try to get rid of vaginal odor, discharge, pain, itching, or burning. Douching will only cover up odor and make other problems worse. It's very important to call your doctor right away if you have:

- Vaginal discharge that smells bad
- 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 an infection, especially one that may be sexually transmitted. Do not douche before seeing your doctor. This can make it hard for the doctor to figure out what's wrong.

Q: Can douching after sex prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?

A: No. It's a myth that douching after sex can prevent STIs. The only sure way to prevent STIs is to not have sex. If you do have sex, the best way to prevent STIs is to practice safer sex:

- Be faithful. Have sex with only 1 partner who has been tested for STIs and is not infected.
- Use latex or female condoms every time you have sex.
- Avoid contact with semen, blood, vaginal fluids, and sores on your partner's genitals.

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: Can douching hurt my chances of having a healthy pregnancy?

A: Douching may affect your chances of having a healthy pregnancy. Limited research shows that douching may make it harder for you to get pregnant. In women trying to get pregnant, those



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who douched more than once a week took the longest to get pregnant.

Studies also show that douching may increase a woman's chance of damaged fallopian tubes and ectopic (ek-TOP-ik) 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. ■

For more information

For more information about douching, call [womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov) at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Food and Drug Administration

Phone Number: 888-463-6332

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

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Phone Number: 800-230-7526

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

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) Resource Center

Phone Number(s): 202-638-5577; Toll-Free: 800-762-2264 x 192 (for publications requests only)

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

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HIV/AIDS Bureau

Health Resources and Services Administration

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

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