

Your most intimate gyno questions—answered

15 things you just can't ask your doctor—or your friends.

BY KAREN J. BANNAN

1 How can I tell if my menstrual flow is normal?

Average menstrual flow lasts about five days and follows one of two patterns, according to Toni Weschler, the author of *Taking Charge of Your Fertility*. It either starts heavy and tapers off or starts out light, gets heavier, and then lightens again. Menstrual blood generally ranges from bright red and thin to brown and thick. On some days of your cycle, the blood can be almost black and slightly clumpy. (When the blood isn't flowing as quickly, it has time to sit in the uterus, thicken, and darken.) Multiple clots or very heavy bleeding can signal fibroid tumors or a very early miscarriage, so you should report any significant changes in your regular consistency or volume to your doctor.

2 My vaginal lips are red and inflamed, but my doctor says there's nothing wrong. What can I do?

Redness can be a sign of a reaction to an allergen or irritant. Since your gynecologist has ruled out an infection, the culprit may be scented toilet paper, soap, or laundry detergent, says David B. Kessler, a dermatologist in Massapequa, New York. Switch to unscented products for a few weeks and see if your symptoms subside. Kessler also suggests repeating the rinse cycle when washing underwear, so no soapy residue lingers.

And pay attention to when your symptoms are most noticeable: If they



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get worse after sex, you may be allergic to latex condoms or, in rare cases, to your partner's semen. By switching to nonlatex condoms, you can avoid triggering a latex allergy; and while there's no way to completely prevent contact with semen, using condoms can help. Finally, you can try smearing on a little over-the-counter 1 percent hydrocortisone cream to help heal the irritation. (It's available in most drugstores.)

3 Can my doctor tell if I've had an abortion, an STD, or a miscarriage?

Not unless you have excessive scarring as a result (and that's unusual). Since these things can affect your mental and physical health, however, it's important to let your doctor know about all your past medical problems and procedures, says Lauri Romanzi, a urogynecologist at Cornell University–New York Presbyterian Hospital. "If you come in with an infertility problem or pelvic pain—either of which can be related to miscarriage, an STD, or complications from an abortion—your doctor will be better

able to diagnose and treat you if she knows about your health history," Romanzi says.

If you're concerned about confidentiality, ask your doctor not to write out this information explicitly in your medical records.

4 What should I do if I'm unable to remove a tampon?

Sujatha Reddy, an Atlanta gynecologist, gets one or two calls every month about "lost" tampons. "If you think you've lost one, make an appointment so your doctor can remove it," she says. But if you forget to remove a tampon, it's not lost forever: There's really nowhere it can go,

since the vagina is self-contained. You may start seeing puslike discharge, which is actually white blood cells your body sheds as it tries to rid itself of the foreign object. Plus, your vagina may start to smell unpleasant. In some cases a "lost" tampon can even lead to an infection, so make sure you get the problem taken care of as soon as possible.

5 What can I do to overcome vaginal dryness after childbirth?

Your estrogen supply decreases immediately after childbirth and stays at that level while you're breast-feeding. In fact, a postpartum woman's body can contain almost as little estrogen as that of a postmenopausal woman, says Romanzi. Estrogen stimulates glands in the vagina to produce lubrication, so you may experience dryness until the hormone starts to increase again, about a month after you give birth or stop breast-feeding. In the meantime, use a water-based lubricant such as Vagisil Intimate Moisturizer or K-Y Jelly Personal Lubricant to supplement your own secretions. (continued)

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6 Sometimes I have vaginal odor when I work out. What is it?

It's probably just sweat. As there aren't any antiperspirants for the genital region, you can try wearing loose-fitting cotton workout clothes, says Romanzi. It may also be bacterial vaginosis, a common, harmless infection whose telltale fishy odor may be exacerbated by the warm, moist environment of your sweaty exercise clothes. See your doctor so she can treat the problem.

7 Can constipation cause pain during intercourse?

Constipation can cause *some* discomfort, especially if your stools are very hard. And that discomfort can sometimes make climaxing difficult. It's unlikely that pain during sex is related to constipation, however. "Severe pain related to constipation would only occur if you had hard stools stuck in the rectal canal," Romanzi says. But this is very rare in young women and is usually seen only in babies and the elderly. To keep things moving along, make sure you're getting the recommended 20 to 35 grams of fiber daily. If you're no longer constipated but you still feel pain, see your doctor.

8 I've had three children, and sex feels very different now. Can the problem be fixed? Or is it all in my head?

It's not in your head. As you age, says Reddy, your body changes—including your genitals. Childbirth can weaken the pelvic floor muscles and damage the nerves in the pelvic region, leaving you less sensitive. If you gave birth more than three months ago and aren't breast-feeding (breast-feeding can exacerbate the problem by keeping estrogen low, thereby thinning and weakening your vaginal walls), see your doctor, who will probably recommend you do Kegel exercises to strengthen the vaginal muscles.

9 I can't seem to hold back gas since I had my baby. Is there something wrong with me?

Not necessarily, especially if you're less than six weeks postpartum. The pelvic floor muscles wrap around the vagina, the urethra, and the rectum. If they are stretched during childbirth, you can temporarily lose control of your sphincter, meaning you may pass gas unexpectedly, Romanzi says. The good news: This

problem should rectify itself within a few months. If it doesn't, see your gynecologist. You may need physical therapy or a surgical procedure.

10 Is wearing thong underwear bad for my health?

It can be, says Lisa Masterson, a Los Angeles gynecologist, some of whose patients have experienced urinary-tract and vaginal infections, as well as skin sensitivity and hemorrhoids, as a result of wearing thongs. "Rectal bacteria can make their way down into the vagina using the thong as a transport," says Masterson. That doesn't mean you need to give up thongs. But if you're having a problem with recurring infections, you may want to wear them less often or switch to regular panties until your infection heals. And try not to wear them while you're working out: A sweaty thong is an especially effective conduit along which rectal bacteria can reach your vagina.

11 Are there any sexual positions that my husband and I should avoid while I'm pregnant?

Your baby is safely tucked away in your uterus, and a thick mucous plug blocks the opening of your cervix; so if you have a normal pregnancy, you can have sex in any position you want without worrying about hurting your baby. Keep in mind, however, that a woman who is in her third trimester may feel slightly dizzy in the missionary position (the weight of the baby can press her uterus against large blood vessels, restricting the flow of blood to her heart and thus making her feel light-headed). "Your best bet is to listen to your body and do whatever feels comfortable," says Karen R. Callen, a San Francisco gynecologist.

12 Why am I able to experience an orgasm one day and find it impossible to do so on another?

We respond to different things under different conditions. Everything from stress to illness can affect your ability to have an orgasm. Also, trying too hard to have one can increase your stress and make having one nearly impossible. Why? Orgasm is a response that is automatically blocked when you're under stress, because your body perceives stress as a danger and boosts adrenaline, triggering the fight-or-flight response. This response may not even be noticeable to you. But when you're stressed, your body reacts as if it's being attacked. And when your

mind and body don't feel safe, you can't relax; therefore, natural functions such as sleep and orgasm are elusive.

As long as you can climax most of the time, it's nothing to worry about, says Jane L. Delgado, Ph.D., author of *Salud! A Latina's Guide to Total Health*. "We know that the mind, body, and spirit are interconnected, so not being able to reach orgasm may just mean you're having a bad day." Try some relaxation techniques: Soak in a warm bath; listen to music; tense and release all the muscles in your body, one by one.

13 Why does it sometimes hurt to be touched right after orgasm?

The clitoris has the highest density of sensory-nerve fibers in the entire body—three times that of the head of the penis. After orgasm the clitoris is engorged with blood and therefore so extremely sensitive that direct contact can be excruciating. If you feel any pain, take a break from clitoral stimulation for a few minutes and have your partner concentrate on kissing and touching other parts of your body. As soon as the blood begins to drain from the area, you'll be ready to go all over again, says Romanzi.

14 What is a Brazilian bikini wax, and is it bad for you?

It's not dangerous, but you may end up on all fours. A Brazilian bikini wax removes every bit of hair in the genital region, including any hair on your anus and between your anus and vaginal opening. Technicians sometimes have you bend over so they can get better access to this area. That said, no matter how you remove the hair, you'll want to avoid doing so right before or during your period, says gynecologist Reddy. "The blood vessels are engorged before the beginning of your cycle, so you could have more swelling and bruising around this time," she says. In addition, Reddy recommends using sugar waxes or other natural waxing products to prevent allergic reactions. Soothe any irritation—and you'll probably have some—with a cool bath or ice.

15 I know it's not OK to have sex right after childbirth, but what about manual stimulation?

Masturbating or manual stimulation is safe, but don't insert anything into your vagina, says Romanzi. "You can definitely masturbate, but to prevent ripping any stitches around the vaginal opening, focus only on the clitoris," she says. □