



WomensHealth.gov  
 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 (also called the birth canal) with water or other mixtures of fluids. Usually douches are prepackaged mixes of water and vinegar, baking soda, or iodine. Women 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. In reality, douching may do more harm than good. Common reasons women give for using douches include:

- to clean the vagina
- to rinse away blood after monthly periods
- to get rid of odors from the vagina
- to avoid sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)
- to prevent pregnancy

**Q: How common is douching?**

**A:** Douching is common among women in the United States. It is estimated that 20 to 40 percent of American women aged 15 to 44 years douche regularly. About half of these women douche every week.

**Q: Is douching safe?**

**A:** Most doctors and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) suggest that women steer clear of douching. All healthy vaginas contain some bacteria and other organisms called the vaginal flora. The normal acidity of the vagina keeps the amount of bacteria down. But douching can change this delicate balance. This may make a woman more prone to vaginal infections. Plus, douching can spread existing vaginal infections up into the uterus, fallopian 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 do not. 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,
- vaginal infections called bacterial vaginosis or BV,
- sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and
- pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)

Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) is an infection of a woman’s uterus, fallopian tubes and/or ovaries. It is caused by bacteria that travel from a woman’s vagina and cervix up into her reproductive organs. If left untreated, PID can cause fertility problems (difficulties getting pregnant). PID also boosts a woman’s chances of ectopic pregnancy



WomensHealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

(pregnancy in the fallopian tube instead of the uterus). Some STDs, BV, and PID can all lead to serious problems during pregnancy. These include infection in the baby, problems with labor, and early delivery.

**Q: Should I douche to clean inside my vagina?**

**A:** No. Doctors and the ACOG suggest women avoid douching completely. Most experts believe that douching increases a woman's chances of infection. The only time a woman should douche is when her doctor recommends it.

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

**A:** Most doctors say that it is best to let your vagina clean itself. The vagina cleans itself naturally by producing mucous. Women do not need to douche to wash away blood, semen, or vaginal discharge. The vagina gets rid of it alone. Also, it is important to note that even healthy, clean vaginas may have a mild odor.

Regular washing with warm water and mild soap during baths and showers will keep the outside of the vagina clean and healthy. Doctors suggest women avoid scented tampons, pad, powders and sprays. These products may increase a woman's chances of getting vaginal infections.

**Q: My vagina has a terrible odor, can douching help?**

**A:** No. Douching will only cover up the smell. It will not make it go away. If your vagina has a bad odor, you should call your doctor right away. It could be

a sign of a bacterial infection, urinary tract infection, STD or a more serious problem.

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

**A:** No. Douching may even make these problems worse. It is very important to call your doctor right away if you have:

- vaginal discharge with a bad smell
- thick, white or yellowish-green discharge with or without a smell
- burning, redness, and swelling of the vagina or the area around it
- pain when urinating
- pain or discomfort during sex

These may be signs of a bacterial infection, yeast infection, urinary tract infection, or STD. Do not douche before seeing your doctor. This can make it hard for the doctor to figure out what is wrong.

**Q: Can douching after sex prevent sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)?**

**A:** No. This is a myth. The only way to completely prevent STDs is to not have sex. But practicing safer sex will dramatically decrease your risk of getting these diseases. You can greatly reduce your chances of getting an STD in the following ways:

- using latex condoms or female condoms every time you have sex
- avoiding contact with sores on the penis or vagina
- preventing the exchange of semen, blood, and vaginal secretions

page 2

NATIONAL WOMEN'S HEALTH INFORMATION CENTER  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health



WomensHealth.gov  
 1-800-994-9662  
 TDD: 1-888-220-5446

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

**A:** No. Douching does not prevent pregnancy and should never be used as a means of birth control. Actually, douching may make it easier to get pregnant by pushing the sperm further up into the vagina and cervix.

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

**A:** It may. Limited research shows that douching may make it more difficult

for a woman to get pregnant. In women trying to get pregnant, those who douched more than once a week took the longest to get pregnant.

Studies also show that douching may boost a woman's chance of 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 difficult for a woman to get pregnant in the future. ■

*For More Information...*

You can find out more about douching by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at 1-800-994-9662 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/>

*All material contained in the FAQs is free of copyright restrictions, and may be copied, reproduced, or duplicated without permission of the Office on Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services; citation of the sources is appreciated.*

Reviewed by:  
 Gary G. Wharton, MD  
 Clinical Assistant Professor  
 Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology  
 Brown University  
 Women and Infant's Hospital of Rhode Island

December 2005