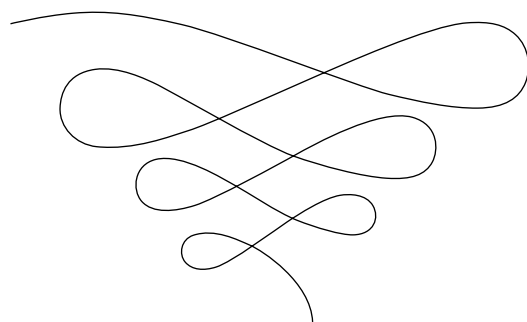


PAN





DORA'S BOX



Ten years after that “vajayjay” nonsense, we’re now saying the real word—loud, proud, and with a hearty emphasis on that second syllable. But could the vagina (vagina! vagina! vagina!) be getting a little too much airtime? All this attention (not to mention hair-removal lasers) has invited a new level of scrutiny...and the products and treatments that come with it.

By Liana Schaffner

IT'S BEEN A FEW (VERY LONG) MONTHS SINCE AN INCIDENT WITH A HOT MIC PROMPTED WOMEN EVERYWHERE TO RECONSIDER THEIR STANCE ON CHASTITY BELTS.

The outrage sparked by Donald Trump's horrifying, and now infamous, remark has settled into a simmer; on the national stage, concerns over national security have eclipsed conversations about sexual assault. But in case you were wondering, the pussy is still up for grabs. And the latest threat isn't coming from a party bus or a presidential campaign (toe-may-toe, toe-mah-toe). A new trend is putting focus on the way we care for our vaginas—and sometimes blurring the line between effective treatments and expensive gimmicks. "Women are taking a more proactive approach to their sexual health, which is a good thing, but they're also having their insecurities exploited," says Lauren Streicher, an associate professor of clinical obstetrics and gynecology at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University in Chicago and the author of *Sex Rx* (Dey Street). "There's a lot of money to be made in female genitalia." And everyone wants a piece of the action.

Services designed to pamper the vagina are appearing on spa menus with surprising regularity. Reported on by beauty editors and popularized by celebrities and reality-TV stars, these treatments have begun to exude a mainstream aura. It's not unheard of for a woman to schedule a "vajacial" (a facial that goes nowhere near the face), and vaginal steaming is now a thing (thank you, Gwyneth). That particular service promises to cleanse the uterus, cervix, and labia with a warm infusion of aromatic herbs—a claim that has many doctors letting off steam of their own. "It's absolute nonsense and offers zero benefits," says Streicher. Beyond the dubious claims, doctors express real concern that

vaginal steaming could pose physical and even psychological risks. "There's a chance that someone might get burned," says Hilda Hutcherson, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Columbia University Medical Center. "But I'm also worried about the message it sends. Treatments like this imply that vaginas are so unappealing, we basically have to send them out to be dry-cleaned."

Some very vocal feminist women have no problems with the concept, though: "We need the ghosts of old lovers to leave us," joked *Girls* executive producer Jenni Konner when she and Lena Dunham praised vaginal steaming in an interview with Paltrow. Her lighthearted remark was off the cuff but may offer some insight into what's really driving this trend. Vaginal steaming has started a dialogue about a previously uncomfortable subject: feminine hygiene. And it's not unreasonable to assume that it's the specter of shame, and not necessarily old lovers, that women want exorcised.

Many swear they're not yielding to outside pressures, though—they're taking control of a sensitive area. "You would not believe the number of women who tell me they've never had an orgasm," says Cindy Barshop, the founder and CEO of VSpot Medi-Spa in New York City. In fact, we would: 43 percent of women report the inability to have an orgasm, according to Planned Parenthood. "I tell them about my own struggles with low desire and incontinence, and the floodgates just open. Women are dying to talk about these things. It's incredible how much we won't admit to just because we're afraid of not appearing normal."

Of course, VSpot provides more than just heart-to-hearts. The med-spa offers an array of nonsurgical vaginal-rejuvenation services, the most popular of which is the FDA-cleared FemiLift laser. Like the CO₂ fractional devices used in facial resurfacing, the FemiLift stimulates collagen and elastin production. According to Carolyn Delucia, VSpot's resident gynecologist, the laser improves lubrication and the elasticity of the vaginal wall and reduces urinary urgency. "Out of all the procedures I do, the FemiLift is the one thing that clients report 100 percent satisfaction on," says Delucia. Barshop credits the device with virtually curing her own issues and

predicts the technology will be widely available within ten years. "It will be everywhere, like wax salons," she says. Gynecologists, dermatologists, and plastic surgeons already provide the service in their offices, but a single session typically costs more than \$1,000 (sometimes as much as \$3,000) and is not covered by insurance. It's a big sell—so you should know what you're buying into. "This is a medical device that's been scientifically proven to be extremely effective at treating postmenopausal dryness and painful intercourse," says Streicher, who uses a CO₂ laser, the MonaLisa Touch, in her own practice. "But some claims and promises—stronger orgasms! vaginal tightening!"—have been published only in the *Journal of Wishful Thinking*."

You don't have to be highly optimistic and independently wealthy to get in on this trend, though. A boomlet of new feminine-hygiene

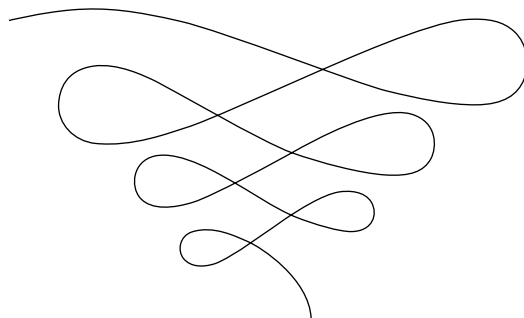
According to a recent poll by the Benchmarking Group, more than 50 percent of women are interested in purchasing natural and organic feminine-hygiene products. To know why, look no further than Lo Bosworth, a lifestyle influencer, a former star of MTV's *Laguna Beach*, and the founder of one of these new all-natural feminine-hygiene brands: Love Wellness. "People are becoming much more ingredient-savvy," says Bosworth, who developed her line after a long personal struggle with yeast infections. "But women are also desperate for products that they can feel good about and aren't ashamed to display." Her collection includes washes, wipes, powders, and vitamin supplements in packaging so spare, it's easy to mistake them for high-end beauty products. And that's the point. "My skin-care routine is complex and makes me feel like I'm at a spa," says Bosworth. "There's no reason why women shouldn't take care of their feminine health in the same way."

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products offers women much more reasonable ways to care for their genitalia. There are pH-regulating washes, foams, and wipes; infection-fighting suppositories; an isotonic odor-fighting gel; even oxygen-releasing maxi pads that aim to "do for vaginas what Nike Shox did for your feet." (Make them run faster?) Aggressive marketing aside, most of this stuff is all-natural—even organic. Gynecologists must have *something* nice to say. Yeah, nope. "A complete and total waste of money," insists Hutcherson, who bristles at the notion of using a cleansing product to prevent infections. "Your body regulates your pH, and it's ridiculous to imply that something like a cleanser will maintain that balance for you." Hutcherson says that the best way to wash is with a fragrance-free cleanser and plain old water. Anything beyond that, she says, is strictly unnecessary. "The vagina is a self-cleaning organ; it takes care of itself," she says. "Of all the things that women have to worry about, washing or deodorizing their vulvas is not one of them."

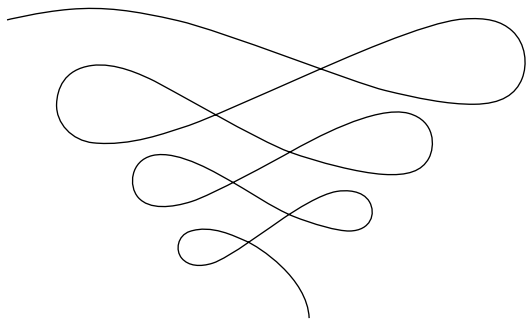
But many of us, it seems, won't be dissuaded.

The problem with devoting as much attention to your vagina as you do to your face is that it's easy to become hyperaware of it. Waxing, steaming, and exfoliating the area opens the door to more scrutiny. Doctors draw a direct correlation between hair removal and far more aggressive procedures, such as labiaplasty—a surgical reduction of the labia. (Side note: VSpot's Barshop just happens to be the former owner of the hair-removal chain Completely Bare.) "When women had abundant pubic hair, they couldn't even see their labia. Now patients ask me about their labia all the time," says Streicher. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists calls the recommendation for labiaplasty "untenable," noting "obvious risks" such as infection, scarring, and pain during sex. General



gynecologists will perform medical labiaplasty only to relieve physical symptoms, such as chafing or discomfort during intercourse. But then there's the specialized field of female genital plastic and cosmetic surgery. "When a woman feels strongly that her genitals are too large, it can affect her self-esteem, body image, and sex life," says Michael P. Goodman, a genital plastic surgeon in Davis, California. "Most often, patients come to me with both functional and cosmetic concerns. I don't think I have the right to dismiss either." And while Goodman does trace the growing demand for genital surgery to hair-removal practices and the unrealistic standards circulated by pornography ("and that's unfortunate"), he also considers it a "spin-off" of the women's liberation movement. "Women are basically saying, 'I can do what I want with my body,' which is always a good thing."

Except when it really isn't. On the surface, women seeking treatments to improve their sexual health and hygiene is just the sort of trend that inspires the word "empowerment." We heard it used multiple times while reporting this story. But when those products and services are medically unnecessary, dearly priced, downright risky, or all of the above, the sterling narrative starts to unravel. Exploitation, after all, takes many forms. And if we may, getting grabbed is getting old.



THE LOWDOWN ON LUBES

Personal lubricants present something of a, well, slippery slope. Doctors agree that many commercial, water-based versions contain chemical preservatives, which may cause irritation.

Glycerin is another ingredient commonly found on the "intimate care" shelf. Like glucose, a sugar, it can contribute to an overgrowth of yeast, says Streicher. For this reason, many women turn to homemade solutions—a well-meaning tactic that often does way more harm than good. Cooking oils (coconut, olive, vegetable), mineral oil, and petroleum jelly are hard to rinse off, trapping bacteria inside the vagina and promoting infection.

What's more, every single one of them dissolves latex, says Streicher, making condoms and diaphragms less effective. Look for a silicone-based lubricant instead. "They are condom compatible, last longer, and don't contain preservatives or glycerin like water-based lubes," says Streicher, who likes Replens Silky Smooth. Some doctors are also getting on board with organic lubricants.

"They tend to be free of harsh chemicals and wash away easily," says Hutcherson. One that fits the bill: Sustain organic personal lubricant.

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