



The Big Vagina Report

Exploring the complicated
relationships we have with
our vaginas

The faces behind the voices



Charlene Douglas
Sex and Intimacy Expert



Dr Shazia Malik
Consultant Obstetrician
and Gynaecologist



Charlea Samuel
Senior Brand Manager -
Balance Activ

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Vaginas.

Roughly half of the world's population have one, yet for many, it's the body part they're least familiar with.

Despite their leading role in all things life, pleasure and health, our vaginas rarely get the attention they need from us – leaving them neglected and misunderstood.

At Balance Activ, we're determined that people with vaginas build stronger relationships with their bodies, and gain the confidence they need to talk more openly about this topic without shame – whether that be with friends, health professionals or the local pharmacist.

We surveyed 5000 women* across the UK, to compile the 'Big Vagina Report' and found that many women across the country haven't been given the tools or language they need to talk about their vaginas freely. For many, this has led to a lack of understanding around what is considered 'normal' and a sense of pressure to prioritise being discreet, over and above their own wellbeing.

* The term 'women' in this report is used to describe those who told us they identify as female.

“

Although sex education in schools has improved over the years, this report demonstrates that there is still a lot of work required, to remove the stigma around discussing matters concerning the vagina. In my practice women have shared that their shame around speaking about their vaginas, began in their earlier years when their parents either awkwardly spoke to them about puberty/physical intimacy or avoided the topic altogether. Both responses communicated to these women that they should be ashamed to talk about their vaginas.

— Charlene Douglas: Sex and Intimacy Expert



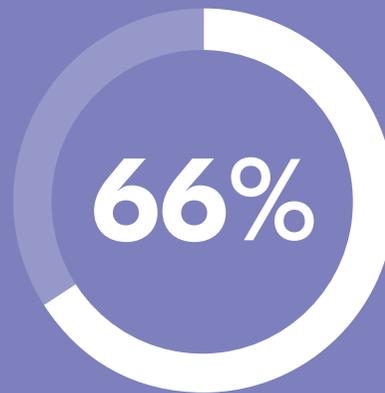
Understanding women's bodies

We are uneducated about our own vaginas.

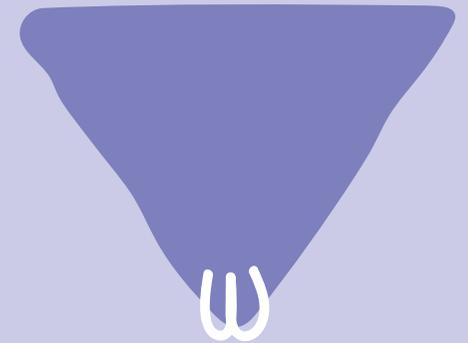
While we're by no means suggesting you strike up a conversation about vaginas on your morning commute, there's no denying the positive impact that an open discussion can have on our understanding of the female body. Despite this, a significant **66%** of the women we surveyed said they **'rarely'** or **'never'** engage in conversation about private parts – with this proportion increasing in older age groups.

Equally alarming is the fact that **a fifth** of those surveyed say they learnt **nothing at all** about female anatomy at school, and **almost half** only learnt a **little bit**. It's clear that, not only are many women finding themselves relatively uneducated about their own vaginas as they enter adulthood, but even in adulthood, they rarely share what they do know with those around them.

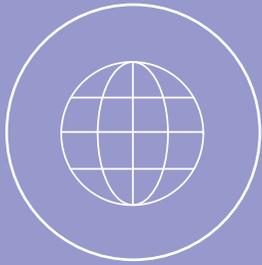
The impact of this is clear. **46%** of UK women **'agree'** or **'strongly agree'** that they are never quite sure if what's happening with their vagina is normal or abnormal. This proportion increases to **57%** in 18-24 year olds and **48%** in among 25-34s – demonstrating a higher degree of unfamiliarity among younger generations towards their own bodies.



say they 'rarely' or 'never' engage in conversation about private parts.



When/if experiencing an intimate issue, where are you most likely to turn to for advice in the first instance?



The internet
30%



GP
24%



Partner
19%



Close Friend
9%



Close Family
7%



Pharmacist
4%

46%

say they are never sure if what's happening with their vagina is normal.

This is surprising in an age of information overload, where the internet offers readily available health advice — be it good or bad — at the touch of a button. In fact, the most common resource women of all ages turn to when experiencing intimate issues is the **internet** itself—with **a third** of women citing this as their main source of advice.

It'll come as no surprise that we advocate for healthy balance here at Balance Activ, and this is exactly what we hope all women can find if navigating a complex relationship with their vaginas — the ability to be open with close friends, family and partners, while knowing when to seek guidance from a professional.

Of all the statistics from this report, 57% of 18-24 year olds reporting that they are 'never quite sure if what's happening with their vagina is normal or abnormal' has to be the most alarming. The internalised shame that these women experience when discussing their vagina, can cause them to not seek medical assistance when needed, to avoid feeling embarrassed. I hope that shocking statistics such as these encourage more people with vaginas to talk openly to trusted people in their lives, and to a GP when necessary.

— **Charlene Douglas, Sex & Intimacy Expert**

Embarrassment

This is one of the most unhelpful emotions we have.

A symptom of overthinking, it can be a stubborn barrier to positive action – forcing us to prioritise how we're perceived by others over and above what's best for ourselves.

For many of us, it's this very feeling that prevents us from discussing or seeking help with issues relating to our vaginas. Our research found that **over three quarters** of women in the UK (77%) would be **embarrassed** talking about private parts of their body with people they **don't know that well** – and this proportion increases even more for those of an older age group.

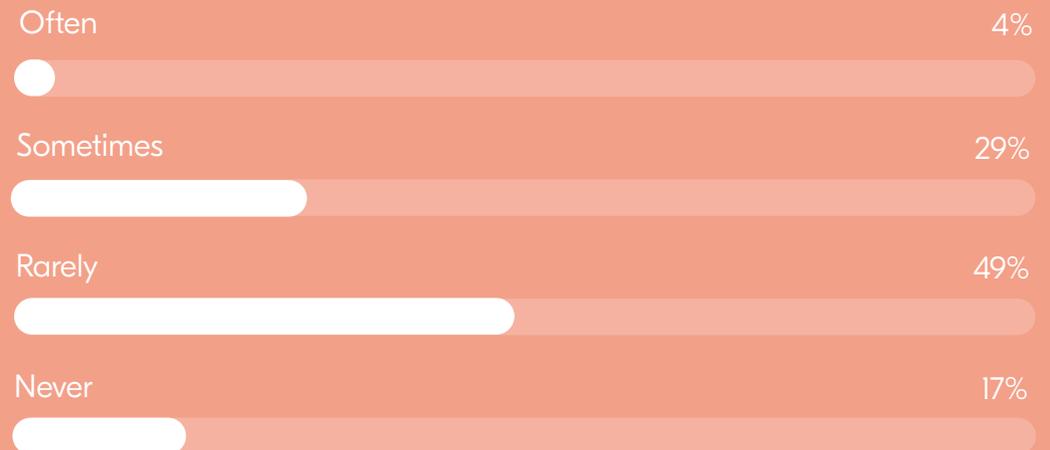
The impact of this shame is even more concerning given that a significant 39% of women said they'd be **embarrassed** talking to a **healthcare professional** about their private parts – the very people trained to support women in this area.

So which subjects are off limits? Well, **half** of respondents said they would be uncomfortable talking about discharge – followed closely by **STIs (49%)**, **bacterial vaginosis (47%)** and **sex (44%)**.



of women said they'd be embarrassed talking to a healthcare professional about their private parts.

How often do you engage in conversations about your private parts?



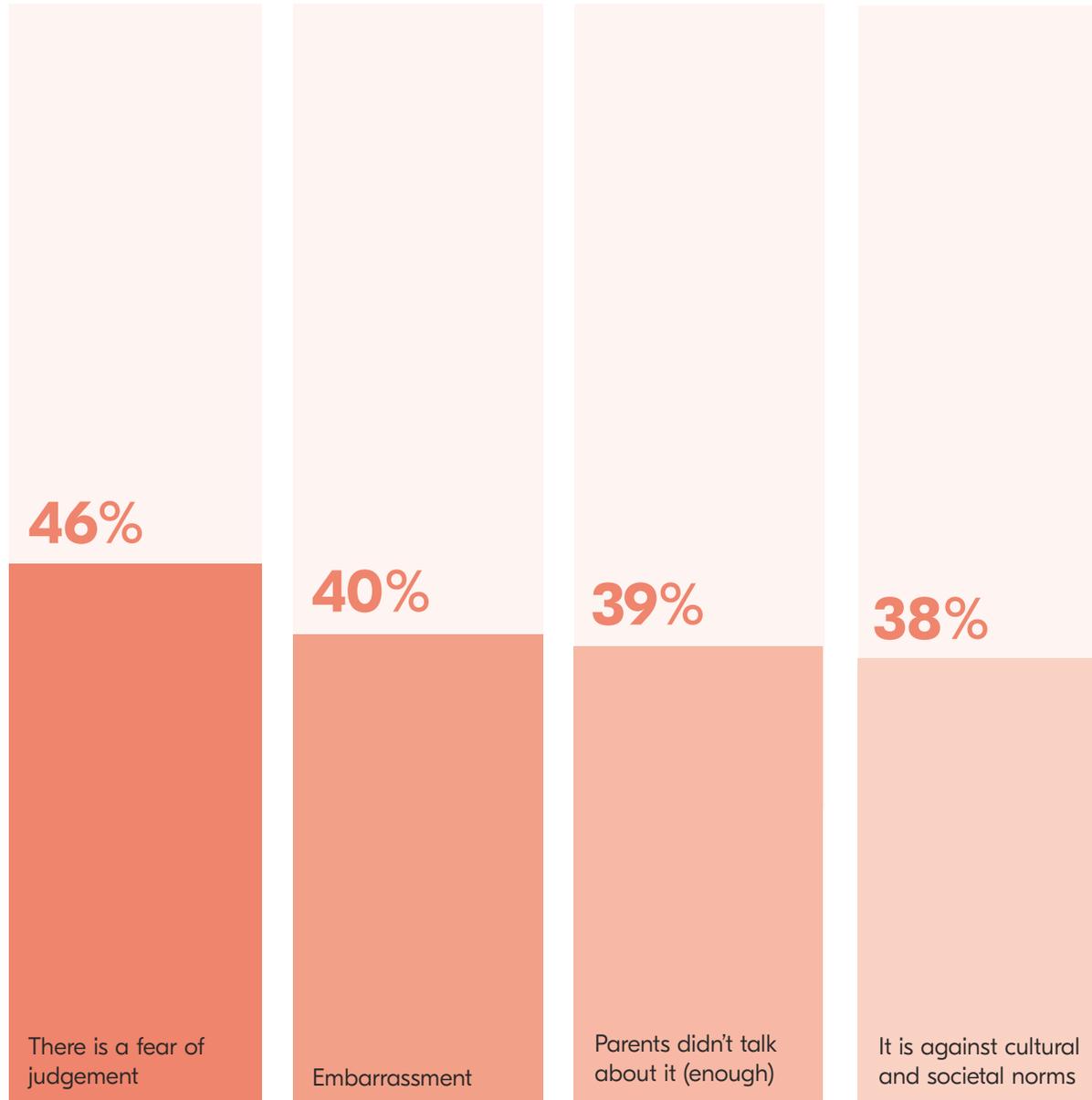
**Dr Shazia Malik, Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist:**

Women should feel comfortable and confident about speaking in confidence to their GP or healthcare professional about intimate health. We are here to help and we've seen and heard everything before! I'm so pleased to see research like this being produced, which brings these issues into the limelight and will hopefully help women to feel more empowered to talk openly about these things.

Which topics are you embarrassed to talk about?

- | | |
|------------------------|------------|
| 1. Discharge | 50% |
| 2. STIs | 49% |
| 3. Bacterial Vaginosis | 47% |
| 4. Sex | 44% |
| 5. Thrush | 38% |

Why is there a stigma around talking about women's private parts?



Yet the driving force behind this hesitation differs across generations. For those in the younger age brackets, the most popular reason cited for this unease was **fear of judgement** – with **56%** of those aged 18-24s and **59%** of 25-34s citing this rationale, compared with **35%** of 55-64s and **24%** of those aged 65+. Conversely, the older generation were more likely to claim that it was **against cultural and societal norms** to talk openly about these topics.

We all get embarrassed from time to time – whether tripping over an uneven pavement or struggling awkwardly with a piece of gym equipment – but when embarrassment begins to impact the way we talk about our bodies, it's time to acknowledge the damage it can cause.

45%

of women aged 65+ say it is against cultural and societal norms to talk about your private parts.

I am hopeful that a report such as this one, will help women to understand that it's okay to talk about any concerns they may have with their vaginas. Some conditions can produce a fish-like odour, burning when peeing or itching in and around the vagina. Feeling embarrassed to discuss these vaginal changes, can have an impact not only on physical health but mental health too.

– Charlene Douglas, Sex & Intimacy Expert

The voices used when talking about anatomy

The voices used when talking about anatomy

Have you ever hidden a tampon up your sleeve...

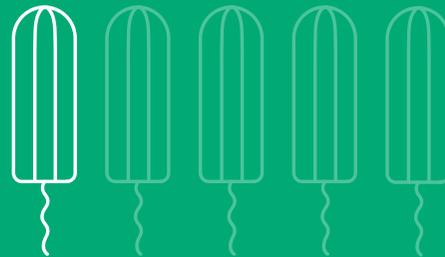
as you walked to the toilet? Or lowered your voice in a shop when asking for intimate products?

Whether conscious of it or not, the embarrassment, shame or stigma we feel towards our vaginas — no matter how light or heavy we carry this burden — can creep into our everyday actions. So how does it impact the way we talk about our most intimate areas?

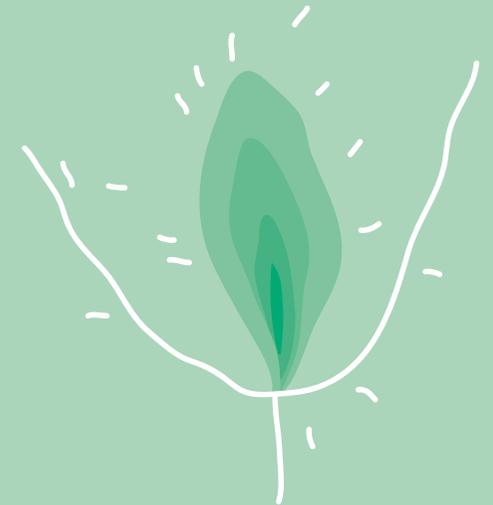
While it's promising to see that **58%** of UK women would talk normally when asking for an intimate product from behind a counter, we found that **over a fifth** of women would whisper or use a lowered voice, and 8% would **never** ask for intimate products behind a counter **at all!**



Over 1 in 5 women



would whisper or use a lowered voice when asking for an intimate product over the counter.



Reasons for never asking for intimate products over the counter



46%

Order online instead



40%

There is a lack of privacy



39%

Embarrassed or ashamed



8%

Prefer not to say

'I know it's completely normal to talk about my private parts but I would rather minimise it as much as possible.'



- Strongly agree **26%**
- Somewhat agree **44%**
- Neither agree or disagree **21%**
- Somewhat disagree **6%**
- Strongly disagree **2%**

7 in 10 would like to minimise chat about their private parts as much as possible.

When asked why this might be, **46%** of respondents said they'd rather order it online, **40%** cited a lack of privacy when making this request so openly and **39%** said they would simply feel too embarrassed or ashamed.

Digging a little deeper, the majority of respondents admitted to altering their voice in this way despite being aware that it was somewhat unnecessary. 7 in 10 respondents told us that, whilst knowing it's completely normal to talk about their private parts, they would rather minimise it as much as possible — over a quarter **strongly agreed**.

While great strides have been made to normalise conversations on this topic, there's no doubt that stigma continues to rear its ugly head in ways we least expect.

It is understandable that someone would want to maintain their privacy when ordering intimate products, and therefore lower their voice. I believe though that what the lowered voice demonstrates is a sense of shame and secrecy about something that should be seen as normal, and that is unhealthy for our physical and emotional health. Interestingly, we probably wouldn't feel the need to whisper when ordering toilet paper. I believe it stems from the messages we receive from many sources throughout our lifetime, that we should hide and not speak openly about anything to do with vaginas.

— **Charlene Douglas, Sex & Intimacy Expert**

The names given to female parts

The names given to female parts

Lady garden, foof, coochie, cha cha, noo-noo...

The list of nicknames for our 'private parts' seems to never end. Despite there being perfectly good vocabulary at our disposal, some of us continue to shy away from its use altogether – lacking the confidence to use the accurate language freely and without shame.

In fact, **26%** of respondents told us they usually refer to their vagina as something else, such as a **nickname** – the most common being 'private parts' (**24%**), 'privates' (**22%**), 'fanny' (**21%**) and 'down there' (**21%**). **Over a fifth** of respondents feel that using the term 'vagina' is somewhat **'unfitting'**.

Yet if we're not born with any embarrassment around our bodies, where does this urge to edit our language come from?

When asked to consider the language their **parents or carers used** when referring to a woman's **'private parts'**, **over a third** of UK women surveyed (34%) said their guardians normally used a non-medical term such as **'private parts'** (25%), **'down below'** (14%), **'down there'** (14%) and **'front bottom'** (11%).



26%

say they usually refer to their vagina as something else.



What nicknames do you ever use for 'vagina'?



'Private parts'
24%



'Privates'
22%



'Fanny'
21%



'Down there'
21%



'Down below'
19%



'Lady bits'
19%



'Bits'
17%



'Downstairs'
13%

18%

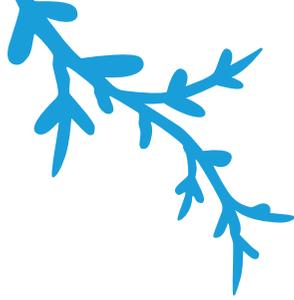
of women were made aware of the medical term of their private parts before the age of 11.

While nicknames like Lady Jane, hoo-Ha and vajayjay may make us chuckle, is it time we question the need to use them at all?

The many names that people use instead of using the name 'vagina' — or the anatomically correct name, 'vulva' — suggests that this part of the body isn't to be taken seriously. We don't have 'funny' names for our ears or eyes, so why for the vagina/vulva? The vulva and vagina significantly contribute to creating life, so keeping them healthy should be our top priority.

**— Charlene Douglas,
Sex & Intimacy Expert**

Issues that affect women



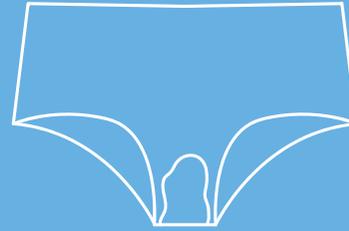
Issues that affect women

Women still have a long way to reach best friends status with their vaginas.

It'll come as no surprise that, in order to build a strong and lasting relationship – whether that be with friends, family or romantic partners – you must take the time to really get to know the other person. So, how can we expect to have a positive relationship with our vaginas if we don't take the time to understand them a little better?

Our results show that some women still have a long way to reach best friend status with their vaginas – with many respondents not being able to identify the source of the problem when experiencing troublesome symptoms in that area.

45% of women we surveyed said that they have experienced their vagina secreting a discharge they had **no idea about how to identify on their own**. Over a **fifth (22%)** are not confident they know the symptoms of **Thrush** and over **4 in 10 (44%)** are not confident they know the symptoms of **Bacterial Vaginosis**.



45%

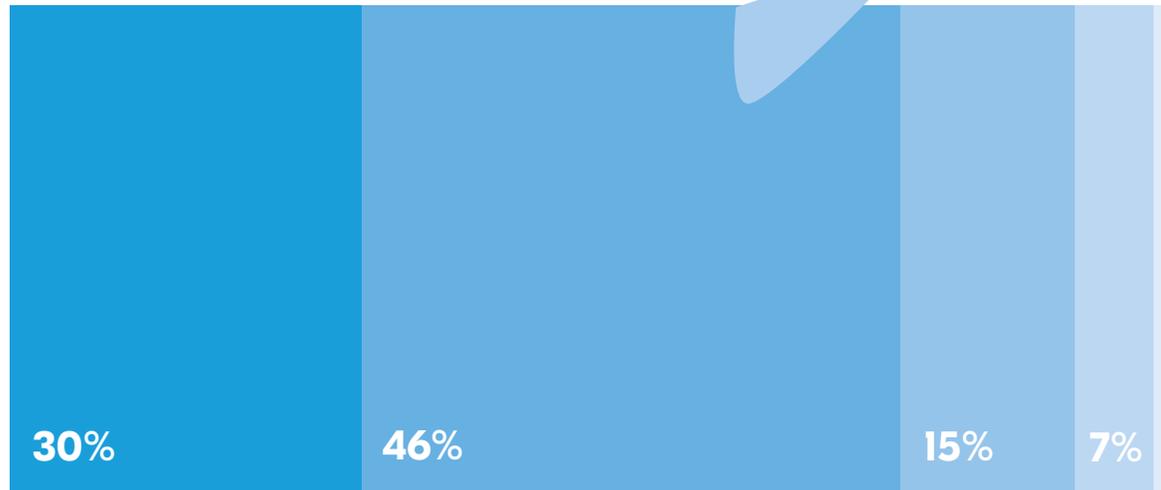
say they have experienced their vagina secreting a discharge they have no idea how to identify.



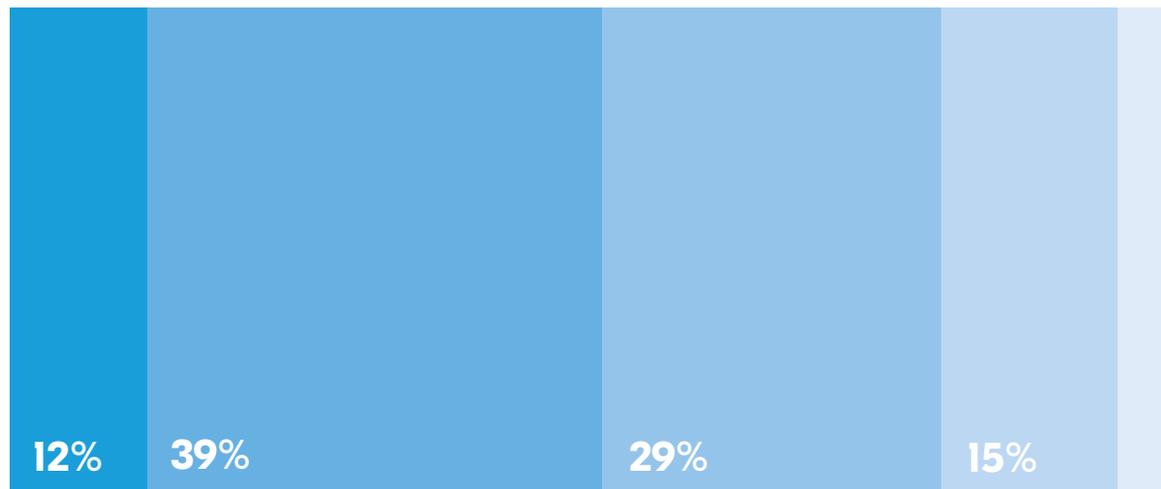
How do you feel seeking help for your private parts when experiencing discomfort?



Women's confidence in identifying Thrush



Women's confidence in identifying Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)



● Very confident
 ● Somewhat confident
 ● Not very confident
 ● Not at all confident

Dr Shazia Malik, Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist:

It can be quite tricky to tell some of these problems apart – take Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) and Thrush for example – the symptoms can seem quite similar, yet there are subtle differences, so it's not surprising that women don't know how to identify them. My guidance is for women to understand what normal discharge really looks like, in order to understand when something isn't right.

In the face of uncertainty, it's promising to see that 57% of UK women do feel comfortable seeking help with their private parts when experiencing discomfort. Still, **over a third of women** would feel uncomfortable – with 8% **feeling very uncomfortable**.

While we shouldn't take it upon ourselves to diagnose our own health issues, it is important that we feel comfortable enough to seek help when we need it most.

I am encouraged to see that 57% of women surveyed would seek medical help, if they had concerns about their vaginas. It's concerning though, that there are still so many women who would feel uncomfortable seeking medical help. Seeking medical assistance can help us to quickly eradicate feelings of anxiety when we notice changes in or around our vaginas. Allowing uncomfortable symptoms to persist for fear of judgement or feelings of embarrassment, is not only problematic to our health, but can impact our ability to enjoy other areas in our lives, free from worry.

– **Charlene Douglas, Sex & Intimacy Expert**

Confidence in anatomy

Can you tell your vulva from your vagina?

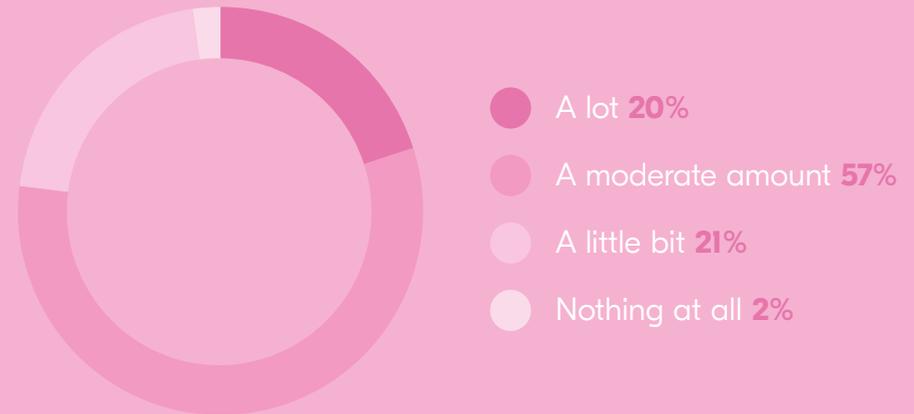
How about your labia majora from your labia minora? If you think you'd struggle, you're not alone: **57%** of respondents told us they only know a **'moderate amount'** about female anatomy and **21%** only **'a little bit'**.

However, our results show that confidence isn't entirely lacking in this area, with **20%** of UK women claiming they'd know **'a lot'** about the female anatomy, and almost **two thirds (65%)** confident they could accurately name **all** parts.

It may not be an option for the inflexible, but over three fifths (61%) of UK women surveyed told us they've **looked** at their **own female anatomy** with a mirror. We might not all be contortionists, but there's no better way to learn about the vagina than studying your own.

But not all our respondents would get top marks on their anatomy test. When asked what they think the term **'vagina'** refers to, **29%** erroneously chose the whole of the anatomy/private parts and **11%** chose the outer lips. Over half chose correctly: the internal muscular canal extending from the vulva to the cervix.

How much do you think you know about the female anatomy?

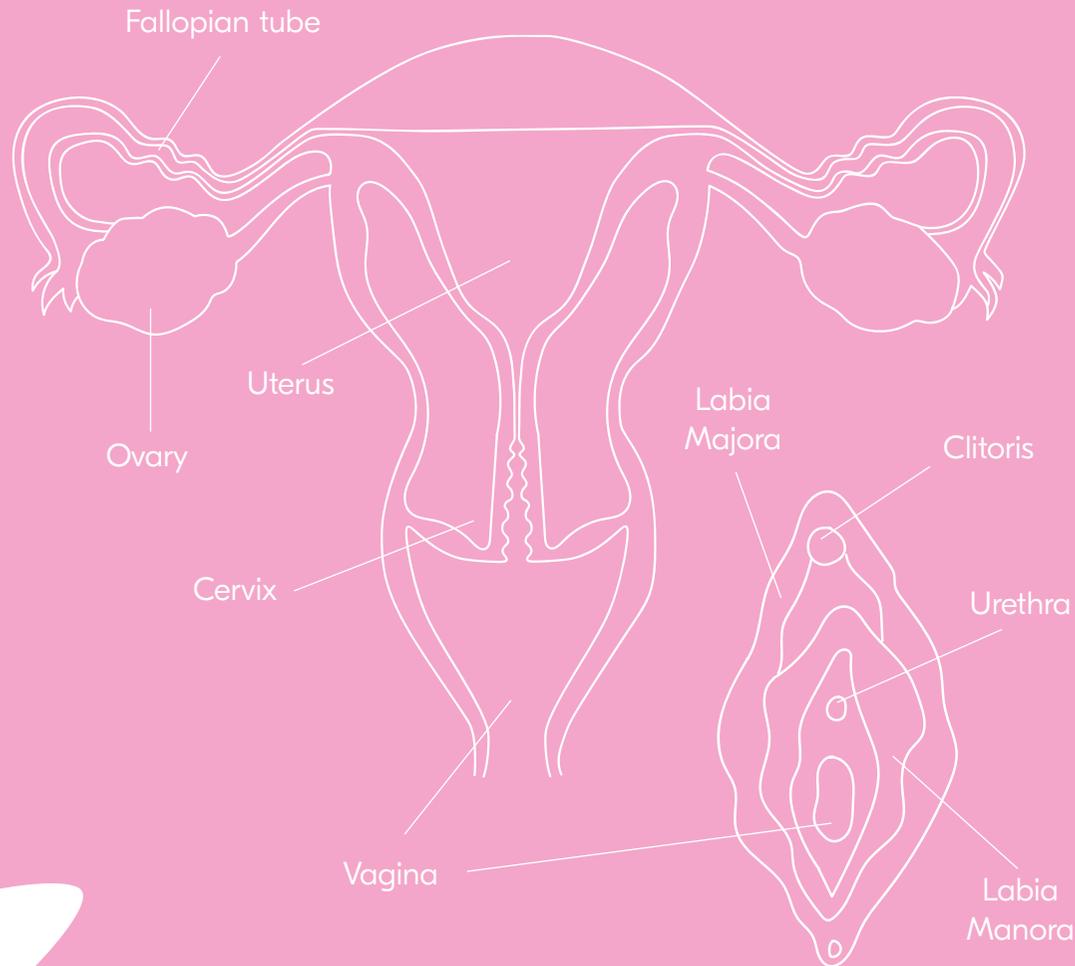


61%

of women say they have looked at their own female anatomy with a mirror.



The Female Anatomy



But not all our respondents would get top marks on their anatomy test. When asked what they think the term ‘**vagina**’ refers to, **29%** erroneously chose the whole of the anatomy/private parts and **11%** chose the outer lips. Over half chose correctly: the internal muscular canal extending from the vulva to the cervix.

Given detailed diagrams of the female anatomy doesn’t often feature heavily in our school textbooks, or we simply never took a mirror to our own, it’s no surprise we need to brush up our knowledge of what sits where ‘down below’.

Dr Shazia Malik, Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist:

It’s clear from this research that there is a lack of education from a very young age about the female anatomy, leading to ongoing confusion as we get older. It’s important that women understand the difference between their vagina, which is an internal organ and the vulva which is external. Looking after the vagina and the vulva requires a different approach, and therefore different products.

There is clearly still a lot of work to do, to educate people on the different parts of the female anatomy. Normalising conversations about the vagina, labia majora, labia minora and the vulva from a young age, will hopefully help women to not only name their body parts correctly, but to also notice any changes in these areas, as well as when it’s the right time to access medical intervention.

– **Charlene Douglas, Sex & Intimacy Expert**

Women's personal issues and wider society

It's no wonder some women have developed a complex relationship with their own vagina.

Our research has revealed that, while some women may have internal confidence regarding their own anatomy, shame and embarrassment has a knack of creeping up on us to shape the way we navigate our external surroundings — whether that be through changes to our actions, language or tone.

In fact, a staggering 74% (almost three quarters) of respondents think females are taught from an early age to **hide their experiences**, and to **'be discreet'** when referencing anything to do with their intimate areas. This increases to 79% in both 18-24s and 25-34 years — suggesting that younger generations are still exposed to this mindset.



19%



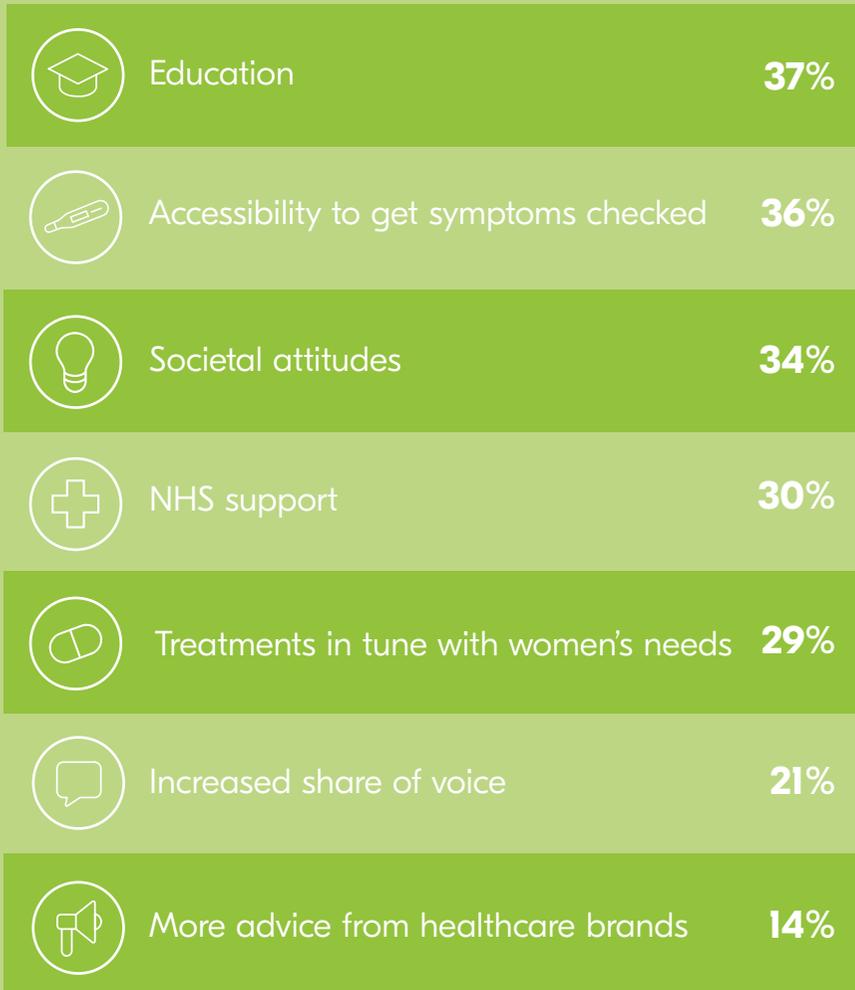
of respondents would miss work or school if they were experiencing a **strong vaginal odour**.



agree that females are taught from an early age to hide their experiences.



What would you most want to change about women's healthcare?



It's no wonder some women have developed a somewhat complex relationship with their own vaginas as they enter adulthood, when many weren't given the tools they need to grow up to navigate life confidently and without shame.

In fact, the **top thing** respondents would want to **change** about women's healthcare is education (37%). This was followed by accessibility to get symptoms checked (36%) and societal attitudes towards women healthcare (34%).

All is not lost when it comes to unpacking and repairing the complex relationships some women have with their vaginas. All it takes is early education, the right language and some open dialogue between like-minded people.... Oh, and the confidence to shout the word VAGINA loud and proud.



Closing remarks

Closing remarks

Balance Activ is committed to empowering women to take control of their intimate health through expert advice and dependable solutions that work in harmony with the body.

That's why we felt compelled to commission The Big Vagina Report, to truly understand the relationship women have with their vagina.

At Balance Activ we aren't afraid to keep the conversation real, to break the taboos around intimate health and to open and normalise conversations around it.

We want women to realise that the issues they face are incredibly common, normal and nothing to be embarrassed about. What's more, we want to be there to provide expert advice and solutions which best suit their needs.

We believe ALL women deserve to feel confident about their bodies at every stage of life and have the choice to restore balance.

— **Charlea Samuel - Senior Brand Manager**



Survey conducted by OnePoll on behalf of Balance Activ.

