

1 *bichano*
 2 *yonni*
 3 *gwain*
 4 *hiiively*
 5 *vaidanna*
 6 *eumbo*
 7 *teke*
 8 *pekepek*
 9 *scheide*

By Tara Ali

A frank discussion about vaginas

It's not every Saturday afternoon I find myself looking at other women's vajayjays. Or rather, art and craft versions of them. Day one of *WH* sex expert Jacqueline Hellyer's Luscious Woman workshop involves spending half-an-hour "making" my ladybits with glitter, glue and shiny paper. I then have to stick my creation on a wall alongside those of the 15 other women here to learn the ins and outs of female sexuality. Thankfully the ice has already been shattered this morning with a cup of tea.

But not really surprising. Ever heard the words "mysterious" or "complex" to describe your bits? Despite living in the information age, there's still controversy over what actually constitutes a woman's genital anatomy. Parts of our anatomy are often missing from medical books, or only the outside is shown. No wonder we feel disconnected. Even the word "vagina" only refers to the barrel part between your legs – there is no word for the entire shebang. This awkwardness around your hoohah is concerning. A study of 2206 women published in the journal *Current Sexual Health Reports* found that women with the highest levels of genital self-esteem reported greater levels of sexual desire and satisfaction, had more sexual energy and an easier time reaching orgasm. And if you feel weird about vaginas – the way they look, behave, smell – it's not just your sex life that suffers. An *International Journal of Sexual Health* study found that women who feel more positively about women's genitals are also more likely to keep their own healthy by seeing their gyno and by practising self-examination. So in the name of keeping your sweet spot, well, sweet, we asked the experts how you can make friends with yours.

Despite the fact that our artwork is actually really pretty, Hellyer goes on to tell us that many women wince at the V-word. If you're comfortable with the word "vagina", consider that a healthy thing. Sure, it's not the most attractive term, but at least you can name yours. "Many women can't," says Hellyer. "They call it 'down there' or 'private parts' or refer to it with an ugly name like 'front bottom'. It's hard to relate to an area of your body that you can't even name. It's like not knowing what to call your arm." So we put it to you: in a recent online survey we asked what you think of your vagina. While 61 per cent of you clicked "it rocks", four out of 10 readers either pressed "I don't like it" or "I wish it looked different". Pretty sad news, hey?

Give it a name
 "Women from other cultures have much nicer names for their girly bits, with names like 'flower' and 'butterfly,'" says Hellyer. "The ancient Chinese had the best names of all, things like 'jade gate' or 'love grotto'. Many tantric sex practitioners used the Sanskrit word 'yoni', which means temple of sexual energy. A touch more poetic than 'front bottom.'" She believes that simply renaming yours to something you find pretty can help you to connect better with it. Cupid's cupboard, anyone?
 While we're on the subject, can you name the parts of your vagina? Not the slang, but the real names for everything between your legs? The last time you

- 1 PORTUGUESE
- 2 SANSKRIT
- 3 WELSH
- 4 HUNGARIAN
- 5 ENGLISH
- 6 KOREAN
- 7 MAORI
- 8 FILIPINO
- 9 GERMAN

heard the term “urethral duct”, you were probably still in school socks. Go on, test yourself with *Name that part* (see right). “Sex education in schools is very limited. It mainly focuses on the dangers of sexuality for young girls: avoiding pregnancy, diseases, not getting used by boys and childbirth,” says Andrew Barnes, a relationship and sexuality teacher. “There’s no mention of pleasure or the internal structures of a woman’s genitals. Many women have no idea what’s happening inside their bodies.”

“One of the reasons women feel so disconnected with their farfalla is because they don’t know how incredible it is,” says Hellyer, who always kicks off her courses on female sexuality with an anatomy lesson. Your vagina really is designer: the parts you can see and feel between your legs – pubic mound, outer labia, inner labia, vaginal opening and clitoris – are only half of the story. It’s generally assumed, for example, that the clitoris is just that pea-sized pleasure tip of nerve endings that feels so blissful when rubbed. What you probably don’t know is that internally, the clitoral tip connects to a shaft that separates to form two separate “fingers” that run along the length and past your vaginal opening. And these “fingers” have a clitoral bulb on the end of each one. “The clitoris is actually really big, but most of it is on the inside,” Hellyer says. “Do you know how much engorging material there is down there? Once you understand it and realise what

your sexual potential is, then wow, you’re going to love it.”

● **Try this** You know what they say about information being power – to appreciate how your Venus butterfly works, you really need to know what’s happening down there. Google that space between your thighs, spend an afternoon in the rude section of Borders or sign up to a female sexuality workshop. Trust us, you’ll have a whole new respect for your most ignored body part. Hellyer runs two-day female-only Luscious Woman workshops in Sydney (jacquelinehellyer.com).

Get to know yours

Another reason for your ambivalence about your hot spots? You don’t see them enough. They’re like that woman in IT who you smile at sometimes – you know who she is but you wouldn’t hang out with her on weekends. You may have taken a mirror down there for a sneaky peek in your teens, but when was the last time you had long, hard look? It’s a sad reality that most men know vaginas more intimately than women do. Ever met a man who didn’t love them? “No matter how far we think we’ve come in terms

50
Percentage of women who are unable to reach orgasm when their feet are cold. When women were given socks, 80 per cent reached their peak*

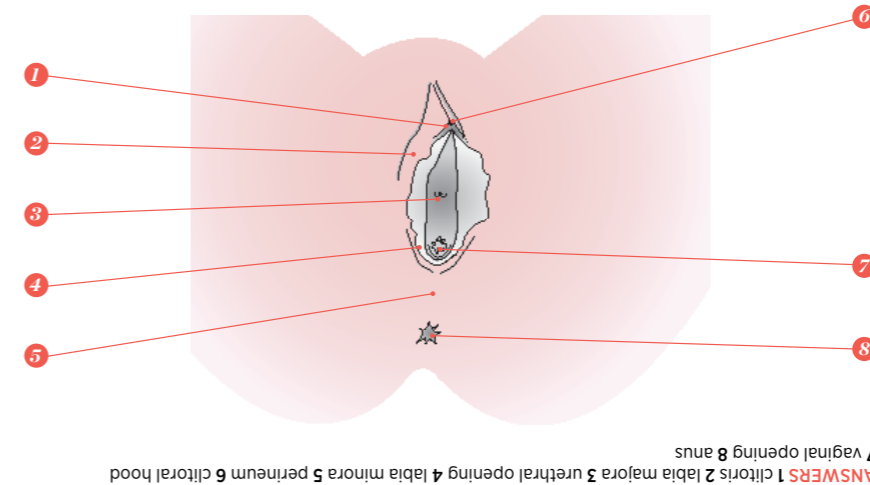
of independence, an awful lot of us don’t really ‘own’ our own sexuality,” Hellyer says. “It’s only something we do in relation to our man, that part of our bodies doesn’t really belong to us, it’s only activated by a man.”

Another person who knows your yoni better than you do is your waxer. Sure, hair removal makes you feel better in a bikini

but it also serves to prettify your body, in much the same way you feel better with a blow-dry or manicure. And ultimately, this means that we’re not entirely comfortable with the way our vaginas look naturally. And that’s not surprising. Unlike our Y-chromosomed friends, women don’t compare fandangos in the locker room. The chances are you haven’t seen too many different shaped or sized ones. For many women, the only opportunity to see other women’s vaginas in detail is in films that star Jenna Jameson. And just like everything else to do with porn, it’s an unrealistic version. “Most women don’t realise that just as male porn stars are selected for their penis size, most women in porn must also have an idealised yoni – commonly called the ‘clam shell’ or Barbie look,” says Barnes. Any Brazilian waxer will tell you

Name that part

So, how well do you know your bits? Grab a pen and fill in the blanks



there’s no such thing as a “typical” vagina.

In 2007 the *British Medical Journal* reported that labioplasty procedures (the surgical procedure that cuts the labia to reduce its size – um, ouch) in the UK had doubled in a five year period. The study authors made a direct link to the rise in surgical to the rise in the availability of pornographic imagery. They were quoted as saying “Patients consistently wanted their vulvas to be flat with no protrusion beyond the labia majora... Some women brought along images to illustrate the desired appearance, usually from advertisements or pornography that may have been digitally altered.”

Adds Barnes: “Pornography is the biggest sexual educator in our society.”

This is one of the reasons he has released his new book *Heart of the Flower* (\$54.95, Pangia Publishing). He and his co-author Yvonne Lumsden asked 50 brave women aged 24-65 of all shapes, sizes and races to have their genitals artistically photographed. “We wanted to show women that, when it comes to their yonis, diversity is what’s normal,” Barnes says. “I’d go as far as saying just as many, if not more women have ‘outies’ than they do ‘innies.’” The photographs are confronting – there are clam shells, outies, red hair, no hair, straight hair, big ones, small ones, ones that look like flowers. If you’re feeling brave, take a look and you’ll get the message that every woman’s vagina is as individual as her thumbprint.

● **Try this** Get a mirror and have a thorough look between your legs every second day for a month, until you’re as used to seeing your vagina as you are your right foot. You need to take the mystery away and replace it with normality. To do this, when you notice a judgement or criticism come into your head, it’s important to simply acknowledge it, then go back to looking at it as purely another body part. “It’s part of your body, so feel it as part of your body,” says Hellyer. “Close your eyes and go over every part of it with your mind. Explore it with your hands and fingers. When you can recline in front of the mirror with legs wide apart and say to yourself how gorgeous that part of you is, then you know it’s part of you.”

Do a vanicure

Your vagina is a bit like your iCal – it gets pretty busy with appointments. Pap smears, STI check-ups, monthly cycles. Sex, masturbation, toys, orgasms. Childbirth. Kegels. Ingrown hairs. It’s a wonder it doesn’t just pack a bag and bugger off for a holiday every now and then. So instead of giving yours a hard time for all the things that can go “wrong”, give your vagina a break. Cut it some slack for the hard work it does. “Rest is such an important part of health and wellbeing and it applies to your vagina too, particularly during your period,” says Hellyer. In many traditional cultures women would take time out to relax and rest, often with other women, because it was a sacred time. Hellyer advises taking it easy during your period, especially the first couple of days. Go for the yoga class instead of Body Attack. If you feel like sex, do it gently. “And throughout the month, pamper it,” she says. “If you’re in a hot bath, part your legs and allow the warmth to wash over it. If you’re in the ocean part your legs and allow the salty sting of the water to caress it. Ask your partner to gently stroke you, kiss you, massage you there.” Think about how much tender loving care you give to the hair on your head – you blow-dry it, use expensive shampoos and conditioners, treat it with masks, twist it into cool shapes. Your hair doesn’t do half the job your lady flower does! So show yours some love. Hell, if you’ve got a spare half-hour and some coloured crayons, sketch

THE WH VAGINA CRAFT AFTERNOON

One visit to Spotlight. Two hours. Thirteen giggling staffers. Below, some examples of what we came up with.



PHOTOGRAPHY: EDWARD URRUTIA. A STUDY FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF GRONINGEN, THE NETHERLANDS.



sex & love

it a portrait. We did (see previous page).

● **Try this** With all the politics that come with having a vagina (hey, Eve Ensler wrote an entire play about it), it's too easy to tense up when a man starts heading southwards. You're thinking anything from "have I waxed?" or "I really wish I'd showered five seconds ago," to "Is he enjoying this?" Or possibly all three. So not sexy. "In the nicest possible way, you need to get over yourself," Barnes says. "This is all your own stuff, your own judgements. "He advises focusing on relaxing your body. Scan your body for places of tension and breathe them out. It's pretty difficult to have an orgasm if you're tense between your legs. Instead pay attention to all of your senses, what his tongue is doing, the music in the background, how amazing it is that your vagina can feel such pleasure. "It's your birthright as a woman to have a fantastic sexual experience and response," says Hellyer. It's up to you to enjoy it. *wh*



WH TESTS IT

Aquaflex Pelvic Cones

WH reader Fiona, 34, gives her verdict

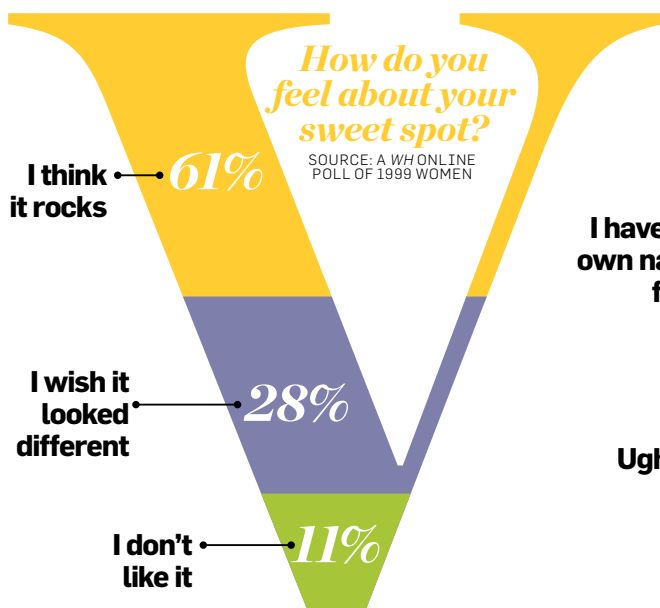
"These are weights for your pelvic floor muscles – otherwise known as a vagina gym! They're said to have real benefits for women who've given birth, like improving muscle tone down there.

"It felt like I was inserting a large plastic tampon – not the most comfortable sensation. The instructions say to start with the largest tube, with no weights, inserted in between where a tampon would usually sit and the opening of your vag. Your muscles should clench and hold it in place. If you can hold it without it falling out then you can start adding in the weights.

"It took a while of fiddling with different weights; the most challenging for me was the high weight. I tried to go about my business around the house; I did the dishes and even a little mopping. It got awkward when my housemate came to chat to me and I was busy focusing on keeping my weights in, as I needed to keep adjusting myself. They've made me more conscious of doing my pelvic floor muscle exercises, but I'm not sure if I'd use them all the time." \$63.95, physiosupplies.com.au

THE WH VAGINA SURVEY

What you think about your vagina



Yes — 69%

Are you comfortable with the V word?

SOURCE: A WH ONLINE POLL OF 2035 WOMEN

I have my own name for it — 21%

Ugh. Puh-lease — 10%

FOR MORE FACTS AND FIGURES GO TO OUR VAGINA HOTSPOT AT womenshealthmag.com.au