

Access to Care

Questions to Ask Yourself

- When was the last time you went to the doctor?
- When was the last time you went to a dentist?
- How often do you give yourself a breast exam?
- Do you ever douche?
- Have you had a Pap smear? If so, when?

There are many things you can do to monitor your health:

- Perform a breast self-exam. 8 out of 10 cases of breast cancer are discovered by women while performing a breast exam.
- See a health care provider for a pelvic examination, Pap smear, mammogram (if you're over 40 years old) and breast exam once a year. These routine examinations can detect pre-cancerous cells, cervical inflammation, STDs, and breast cancer.
- Visit a dentist for a regular cleaning every six months.
- Do not douche. The vagina does a great job of cleaning itself naturally; douching actually increases your risk for infection.

Douching

Douching...Don't Do It!

Douching is the process of cleaning or rinsing out the vagina with a variety of products including vinegar, baking soda, soap and other household liquids.

Why do some women continue to think this is a good idea?

- It smells clean
- Their mother told them to do it
- It helps clean out blood after a period
- It cleans out sperm after sex so that a woman cannot get pregnant
- It reduces the risk of sexually transmitted infections

All of these statements are FALSE!

The truth is that douching:

- Causes more vaginal bacterial infections
- Does not keep you from getting pregnant or contracting a sexually transmitted infection
- Is not necessary to clean blood after a period

What is a good way to clean the vagina?

- The vagina does a good job of cleaning itself naturally.
- A woman's normal fluid gently cleans the inside of her vagina all the time.
- Do not use special sprays, soaps or powders. This can be irritating to the tissues of the vagina.

- For the outside of the vagina, rinse with clean warm water and mild soap.
- Soak in a warm tub of water. Do not use bubble bath.

If you have a discharge that has a bad odor, contact your physician.

Health Literacy

Do You Understand Everything your Doctor Tells You?

Misunderstandings lead to:

- Medication errors
- Missed appointments
- Poor medical outcomes
- Confusion and bad follow up

Practice the following behaviors in order to improve communication with your provider leading to better outcomes for you:

- Ask questions
- Review words that are not familiar to you
- Take along a friend or family member
- Take all of your medications with you to your appointment. This includes vitamins.
- Ask for demonstrations or drawings to clarify information that you do not understand.

Do not be embarrassed to ask questions. Remember, YOU are the customer!

Well–Woman Exam

What is a Well–Woman Exam?

A well–woman exam is an annual examination performed by a medical provider to check a woman’s overall health. A well–woman exam usually consists of: a general physical exam, breast exam, Pelvic exam, Pap smear, an update of family health history, a review of your health history, update of current medications and refills, evaluation of need for further screenings and an update on immunizations. If you don’t understand something your doctor says during your visit, don’t be afraid to ask. (See the Health Literacy handout for more advice.)

What is a Pap Smear?

- A Pap smear is a screening to check for changes of the cells of your cervix. The cervix is the lower part of the uterus (womb) that opens into the vagina (birth canal.) It can tell if you have an infection, unhealthy cells or cancer.
- All sexually active women and women over 18 years old should have one every year.

How is a Pap Smear Done?

- First, you’ll lie down on an exam table and put your feet in stirrups, letting your knees fall to the side (a sheet will cover your legs and stomach.)

- Then the health care provider will put an instrument called a speculum into your vagina, opening it to see the cervix.
- Next, the medical professional will use a special stick, brush or swab to take a few cells from inside and around the cervix.
- Finally, the cells will be placed on a small glass slide, and sent to the lab to make sure they are healthy.

How to prepare for your Well–Woman Exam:

- Don't have sex or use a tampon for a full 24 hours before your appointment.
- Finish using any vaginal creams, gels or films 48–72 hours before your appointment.
- Do not put anything in your vagina two days before. (This includes douching which is an unhealthy habit anyway.)