

YOUR VERY PERSONAL HEALTH

We asked some top pelvic health experts to explain the causes of pain and problems experienced in your most intimate areas – and how to put them right

It's an unfortunate truth that most women will suffer from an uncomfortable (or sometimes embarrassing) medical problem 'down below' at some point in their lives. Whether it's a result of sheer bad luck (or more complex reasons, such as irregular hormone levels), most are usually easily treated. Read on to discover what our experts advise to manage each of these common 'private problems'...

➤ BACTERIAL VAGINOSIS

WHAT IS IT? The most common vaginal condition in women of childbearing age, bacterial vaginosis occurs when the balance of normal bacteria (*lactobacilli*) in the vagina is disturbed.

SYMPTOMS: The symptoms are similar to those of a yeast infection (such as a strong-smelling discharge) though typically milder. Researchers aren't sure what causes the bacterial imbalance that leads to bacterial vaginosis, but it does tend to occur in younger women who are very sexually active and those who have an inter-uterine contraceptive device (IUD).

TREATMENT: A course of the antibiotic metronidazole, taken twice a day for seven days, prescribed by your GP – it clears it up in about 70 per cent of cases. Most episodes of bacterial vaginosis occur for no apparent reason. However, to prevent further attacks, try to maintain a normal balance of bacteria in the vagina by avoiding bath oils and bubble baths and over-washing the vaginal area. Gently splash with water rather than douching (rinsing the vagina out with water) to avoid a recurrence.

• Visit fpa.org.uk or contact the FPA on 0845 122 8690 for more information.

➤ ENDOMETRIOSIS

WHAT IS IT? A condition in which uterine tissue grows outside the uterus, on or around the ovaries, bowel or bladder. Around two million women in the UK suffer from endometriosis and the average age of diagnosis is 27, although it can appear in your teens. However, after the menopause its prevalence drops, as the wayward cells need oestrogen to grow.

SYMPTOMS: Painful intercourse, severe premenstrual pain and infertility – around 40 per cent of infertile women suffer from endometriosis. Difficulty in conceiving can be due to scar tissue blocking the fallopian tubes; high prostaglandin excretion causing irregular periods and problems with the immune system viewing the sperm and foetus as a 'foreign body'.

TREATMENT: Taking the Pill continuously for three to nine months will stop periods and any related pain. Drug treatments can also improve the symptoms. For some women, laparoscopic surgery, which involves the removal of endometrial tissue, can help improve fertility. Others find that acupuncture, reflexology and dietary changes can help.

• Visit endometriosis-uk.org or call Endometriosis UK on 0808 808 2227 for more information.

"IT WAS A HUGE SHOCK TO LOSE MY WOMB AT JUST 33"



Diane Hicks, 38, acting head of charitable services at Endometriosis UK, was diagnosed with endometriosis at 25. She lives in London with her husband John and two young daughters.

"I was able to conceive naturally in the three years that followed my diagnosis, but my symptoms got progressively worse after the birth of each child, including heavy bleeding and severe abdominal pain. I underwent eight operations to remove endometrial tissue over the course of nine years. Then, in 2004, I decided that a hysterectomy was my only option. Although I'd already had my family, it was still a huge shock to lose my womb at only 33. Thankfully, it transformed my life – my symptoms have virtually disappeared and I can finally enjoy playing with my children without suffering for days afterwards."

➤ SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES (STDs)

STDs can occur at any age, but younger women get them most often because they're more likely to have multiple sexual partners. The key for any STD is to catch it early – as some, such as chlamydia, can