



THIS

IS

ABOUT

YOUR

vagina

FEELING EMPOWERED TO TALK ABOUT YOUR BODY OPENLY AND WITHOUT EMBARRASSMENT IS ESSENTIAL FOR ABOUT A MILLION REASONS. SO WHY ARE SO MANY GIRLS STILL SILENT?

BY ERIN SARGENT

See ya, "lady bits"

Let's all give a fond farewell to the cutesy names we've given our vaginas.

"Coochie"
—Britney, 13

"Va-jay-jay"
—Lilly, 16

"Ya-ya"
—Laura, 17

"Downstairs"
—Shyla, 15

"Cupcake"
—Allison, 16

"Notorious V.A.G."
—Destiny, 16

"Down there"
—Shaylie, 14

"Petunia"
—Jodie, 15

Vagina. There, we said it. Feel like you can say it, too? Out loud? If you're embarrassed by words like vagina, vulva and labia, you're not alone: Tons of teen girls have problems verbalizing them. But take a step back and think about that for a second. Why are we uncomfortable talking about our own bodies?

In a perfect world, all of us (teens and grown-ups alike) would be able to talk about vaginas like we discuss the weather, but statistics show that's not true.

According to The Eve Appeal, an ovarian cancer research organization, 65% of young women balk at words like vagina. Even more problematic? One in 10 struggles to talk about those body parts with their doc.

Saying it out loud for those cringing in the back: Being able to talk about your vagina without embarrassment, shame or hesitation is extremely important—for your health, body image and sense of self. That's why we reached out to gynecologists and activists for help. Because it's time to find our voices and advocate for our bodies. Yep, every part of them.

YOUR BODY, FOR LIFE

You only get one body, so having an empowered relationship with it is absolutely essential. But that can feel difficult when the world around you makes talking about your body—especially your vagina—seem taboo.

Growing up, Kelsey H., 15, remembers how she'd "be hushed or even get in trouble for saying words like vagina out loud," she recalls. "And as I got older, the stigma was still there."

That's hardly unusual. "From the beginning of a girl learning about her body and asking questions, it's the parents who sometimes feel uncomfortable and don't use the right words," says Dr. Kate White, associate professor of OB/GYN at the Boston University School of Medicine and author of the upcoming book *Your Sexual Health*. "No one ever says the word 'vulva.'"

SAY MY NAME, SAY MY NAME

But if there's one thing we want you to take away from this article, it's this: Nice girls *do* talk about their vaginas.

Don't quite know the right names for the right parts? Your vagina is fully inside your body. And your vulva is the part that you see on the outside. The outer lips of your vulva are called the labia majora, and the inner lips are called the labia minora.

"Don't be afraid to talk about your body," says Tori Ford, founder of Medical Herstory, a global nonprofit that educates youth and medical professionals alike about female reproductive care. "It doesn't make you less 'respectable.'"

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

If you want to talk with your parent about your body but don't know how to get started, Dr. White suggests finding a time when you two can be alone (like a car ride) and being as straightforward as possible. You can say something like "I have a question about my vagina/using tampons/sex and I really want to talk to you about it."

Have something you'd prefer to discuss with your doctor instead? "We've already heard it all," says Dr. White. "Never feel embarrassed to ask a question or bring up a problem."

Once you've mastered talking about your body with your parents and health professionals, you can choose to test out your new skills with trusted friends. Why be a little TMI? Because by talking about things like periods and vaginas, you better understand your body and your normal.

And you don't have to be intense about it. If your friends wonder why you're starting to share, it's as easy as saying, "I'm trying to talk about this because it helps all of us feel more comfortable with our bodies." (Of course, if your friends choose to keep convos about their privates, well, private, that's OK, too.)

Kelsey says that it's been nice to share with her BFFs because it reminds her that she's not alone. "We share funny period stories, and we can laugh about the awkward/weird/gross stuff that happens," she says. "We all go through the same things so it helps us to talk about it."

Emma R., 14, has even made it a point to "ditch the cutesy terms we've all been using" for vagina as a way to "get more agency back" over her body. "It's not a big secret that girls have vaginas," she shares. "I don't call my other body parts different names. Why should I use words like 'downstairs'?"

And if you still feel a little awkward as you start talking about your bod out loud? That's normal! It can be hard, says Ford, because so much out there tells girls not to talk about it. "But that's why it's so important to start the conversation," she says. "Especially coming from young women to other young women."

So just remember that if you're the friend in the group who makes it feel easier, everyone around you will also feel better. You might just be the reason your crew can break out of the taboo bubble, too.

"It's so easy for girls and women to compare themselves to other people and find fault with how their body looks," says Dr. White. "But we should be the ones who are able to talk about what is true and real. And we shouldn't be embarrassed. We should be proud to share our stories with each other." 