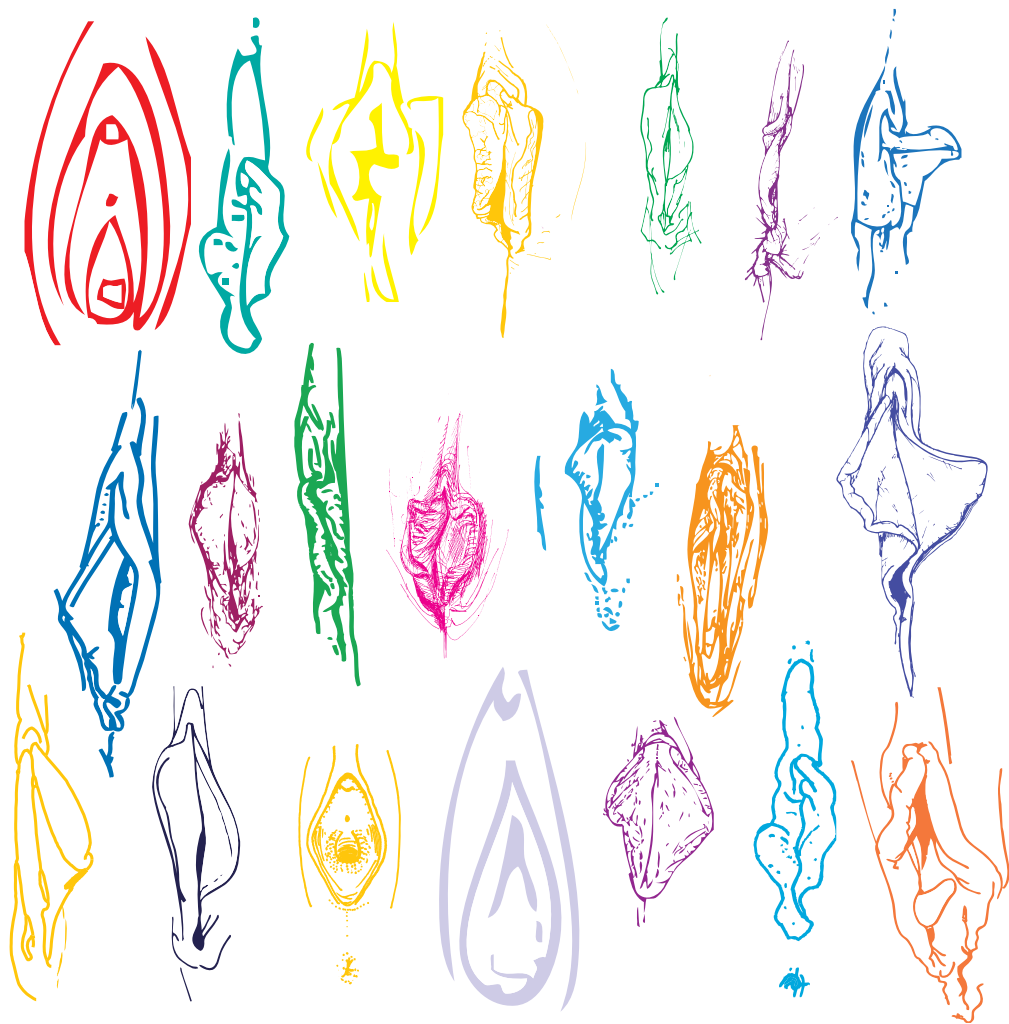


So what
is a **vulva**
anyway?



What is a vulva?

Your vulva is the part on the outside of your genitals, the clitoris and the labia - which have an inner and outer set of lips.

Vulva doesn't mean anus (bum hole) or your vagina - your vagina is actually inside, leading up to your womb.

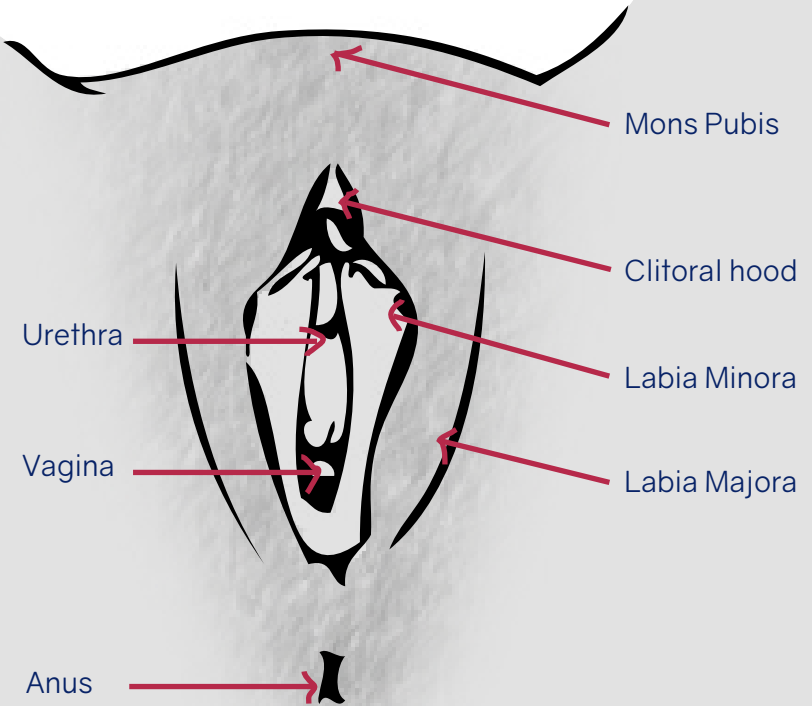
Why pick this booklet up?

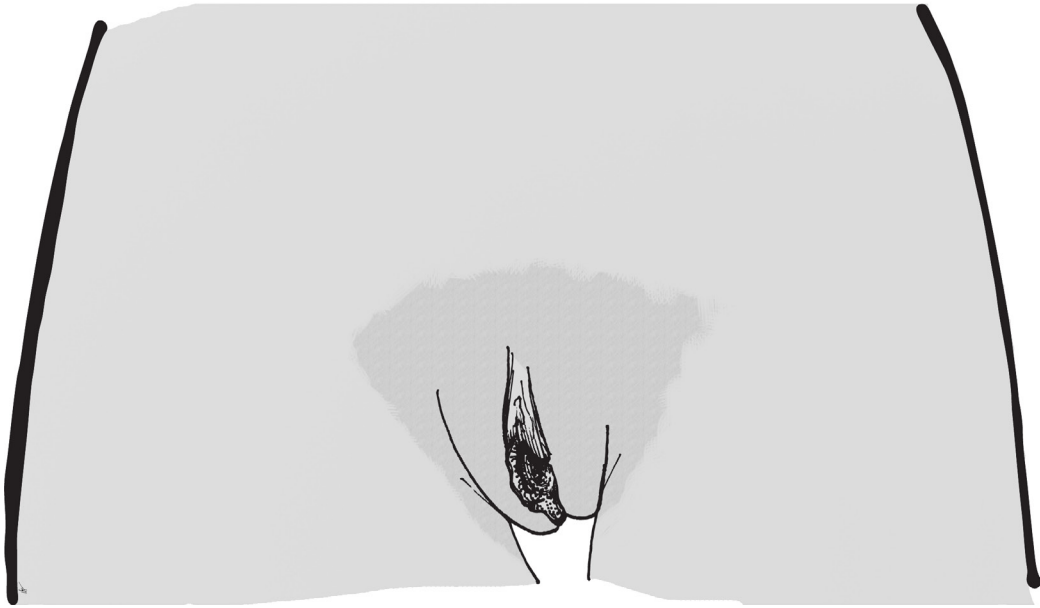
This booklet is here to help you to understand your vulva and how puberty can change it.

You might be worried about how you look or feel and it can be difficult to know where to turn for advice. Everyone's vulva is unique and will change throughout your life.

People call vulva lots of different names: fanny, minge, foof, flower...

Some people say vagina when they are actually talking about their vulva which is fine, but it's a really good idea to know the proper names to avoid confusion.





It's difficult to know what a “**normal vulva**” is. You don't really get to see other people's so it's difficult to appreciate that labia come in different shapes and sizes.

If you have seen any porn you might have seen vulvas looking a particular way (often with no hair and with very tiny labia - so you can't see them).

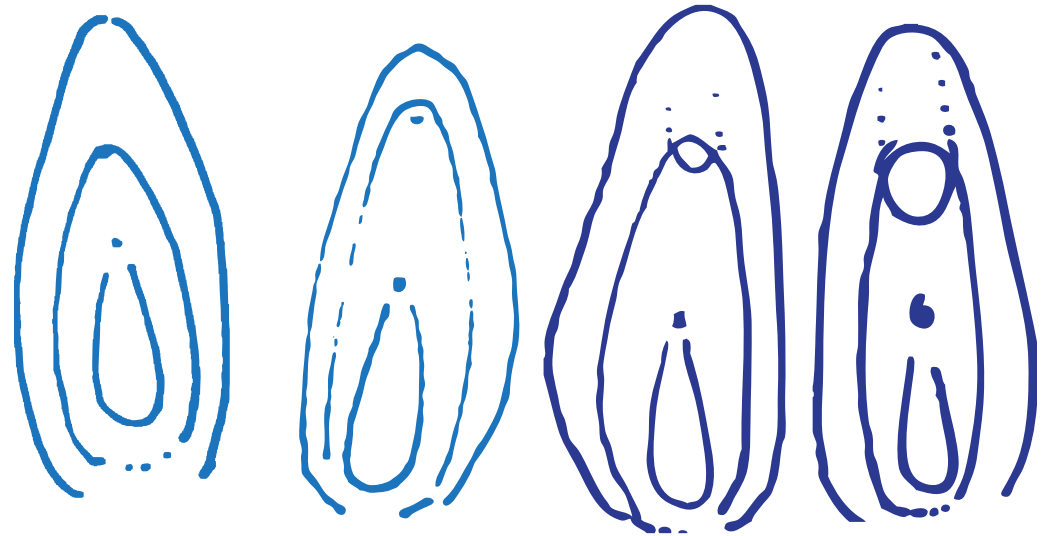
Lots of images are photoshopped to look like this - as are boobs, legs and various other body parts. This creates a false image of what is considered normal or desirable.

Clitoris

The parts of the clitoris you can see are the clitoral hood and the glans - the tip of the clitoris which is supersensitive.

The clitoris varies in size from person to person but if you're feeling turned on then it can get bigger as blood rushes to the area.

It's normal for people to have more or less of a hood and for the glans to be (or not be) visible.



Labia

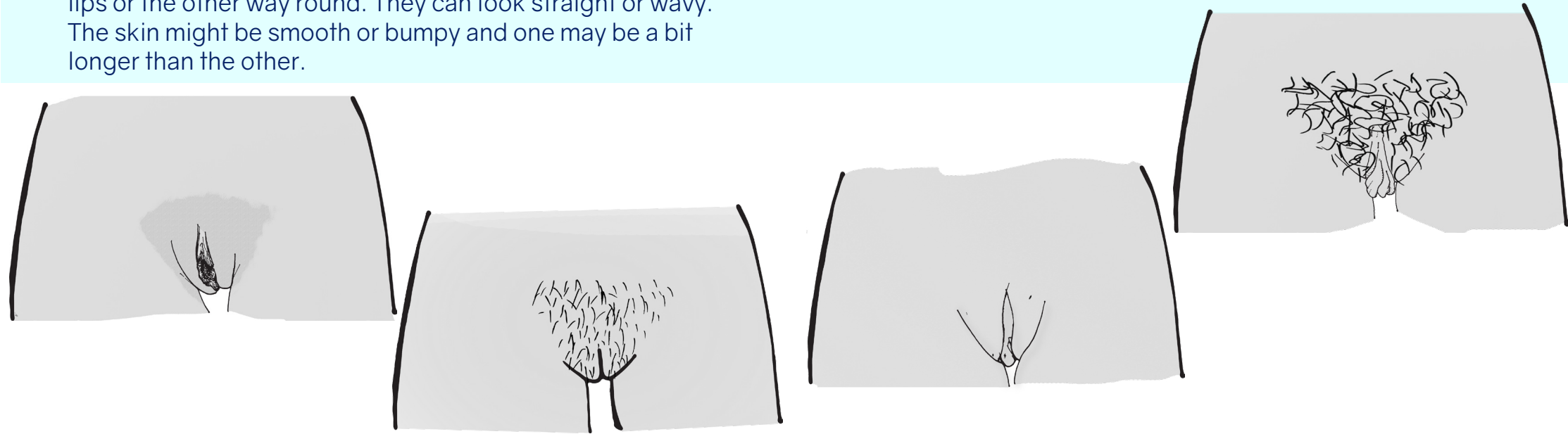
Your labia are the outer and inner lips. They are there to protect your vagina.

The outer lips (labia majora) have pubic hair growing on the sides.

The inner lips (labia minora) are softer without hair and the variation is endless. They can be bigger than the outer lips or the other way round. They can look straight or wavy. The skin might be smooth or bumpy and one may be a bit longer than the other.

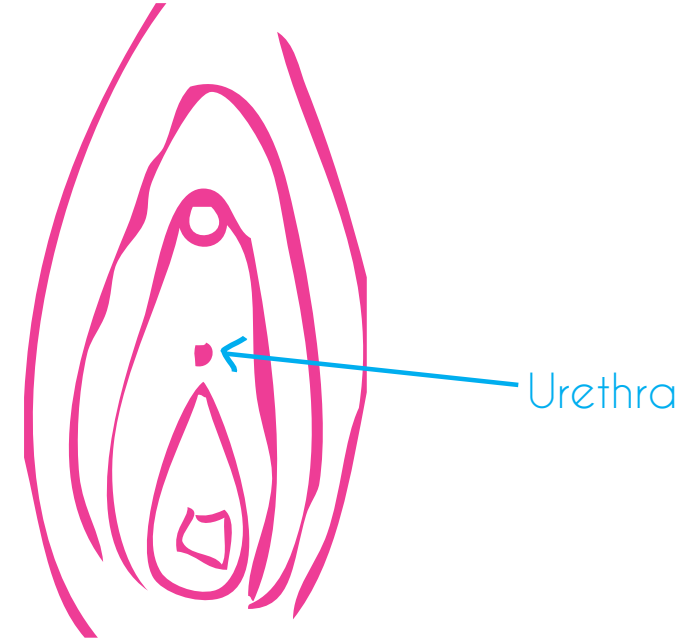
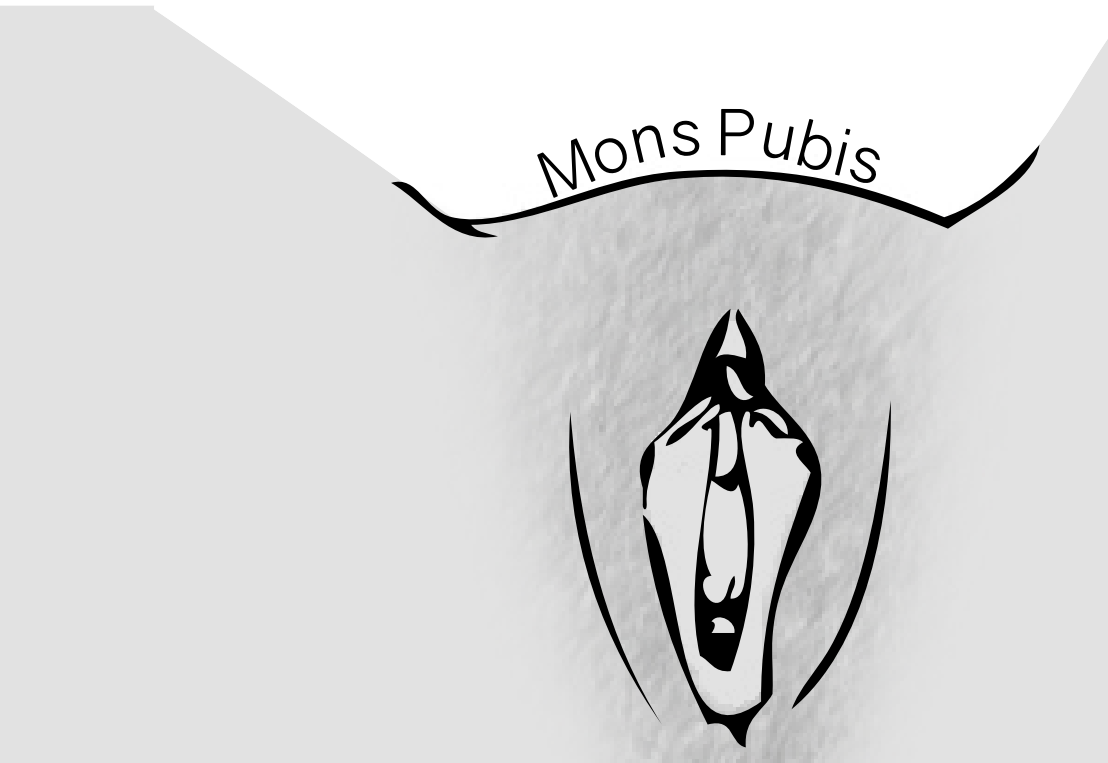
Your labia are often a different colour to the rest of your skin tone and just like anywhere else on your body can have moles or freckles.

As with your clitoris the labia minora are sensitive with lots of nerve endings and can swell if you feel turned on.



Mons pubis

The soft mound where pubic hair grows. The mons is there to protect the pubic bone underneath - it acts like a cushion. As you go through puberty this area becomes more rounded.



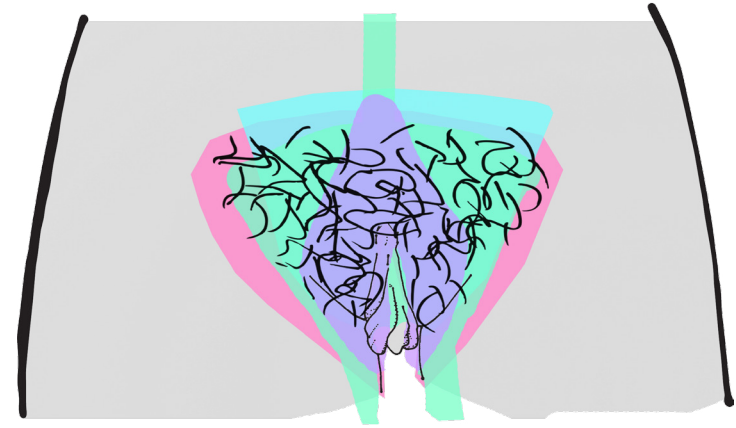
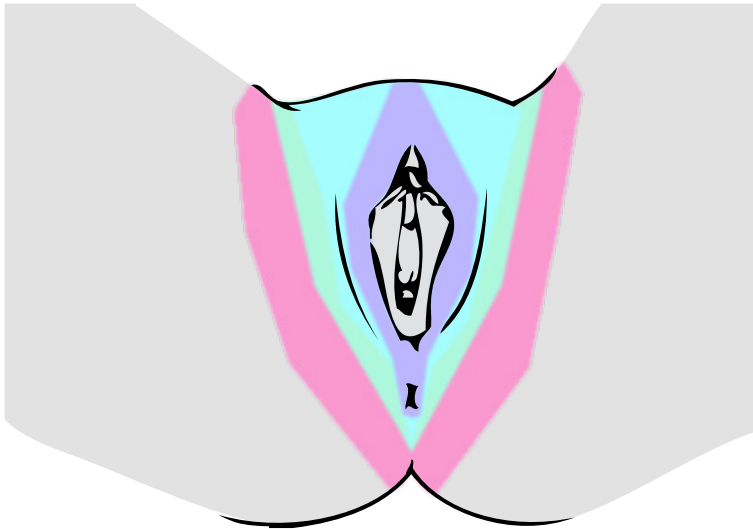
Urethra

Some people don't realise that the urethra (where your pee comes out) is a different hole which is just above the entrance of your vagina- you might want to have a look in the mirror to work out where it is.

Pubic hair

Pubic hair (also known as pubes) might be the first thing you notice about puberty and it's a positive sign that your body is developing. The hair is there to help protect your vulva and vagina.

Pubes come in different colours they may be straight or very curly. Some people have a lot and some not so much. It can grow on your mons pubis, on the outer labia, thighs, tummy and around your bum hole.



If you remove all the hair it is much easier to see and be aware of your labia. They may feel different because those sensitive parts are not longer protected and the skin can rub. This could change how you see or feel about your body.

Shaving, hair removal creams and waxing can irritate the skin and when the hair starts to grow back you can get ingrown hairs, stubble, spots, and boils. If you choose to remove pubic hair then carefully trimming it avoids directly irritating the skin.

Labia and puberty

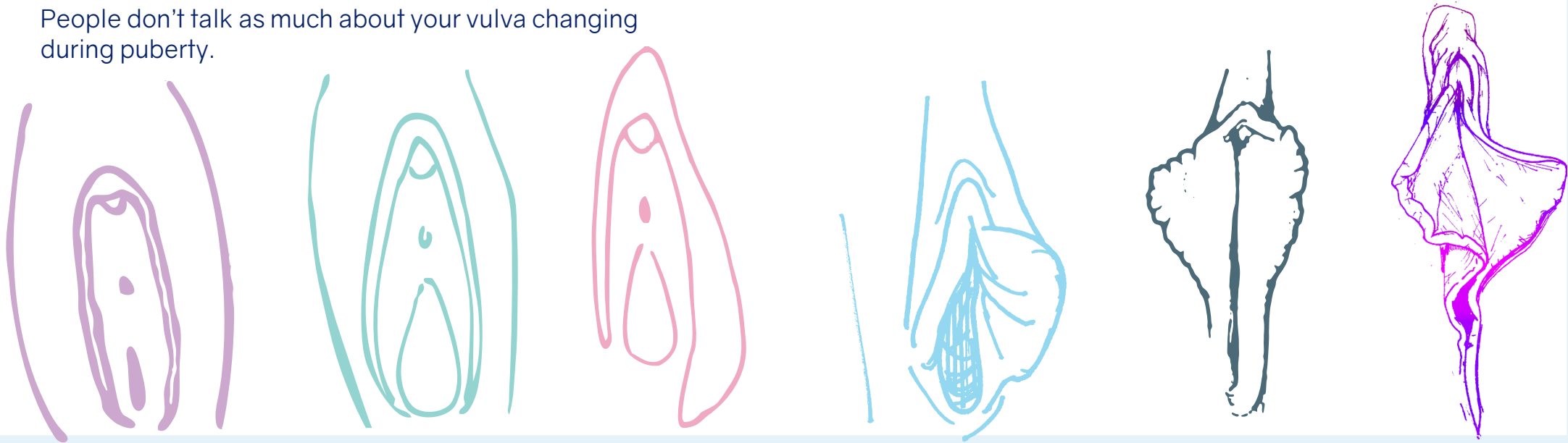
Puberty is a time when your hormone levels increase, creating changes in your body. Puberty can start at different ages but generally between nine and fifteen.

Puberty makes you grow taller, grow hair in new places, develop breasts, start periods and the vulva develop.

People don't talk as much about your vulva changing during puberty.

Before puberty people have smaller inner labia which you can't easily see. When puberty starts they grow. It's really common for one side of your labia to develop before the other one.

The thought that your body is changing and your vulva looks a bit different can take a little while to get used to.



Taking care of your vulva

Underwear and clothing

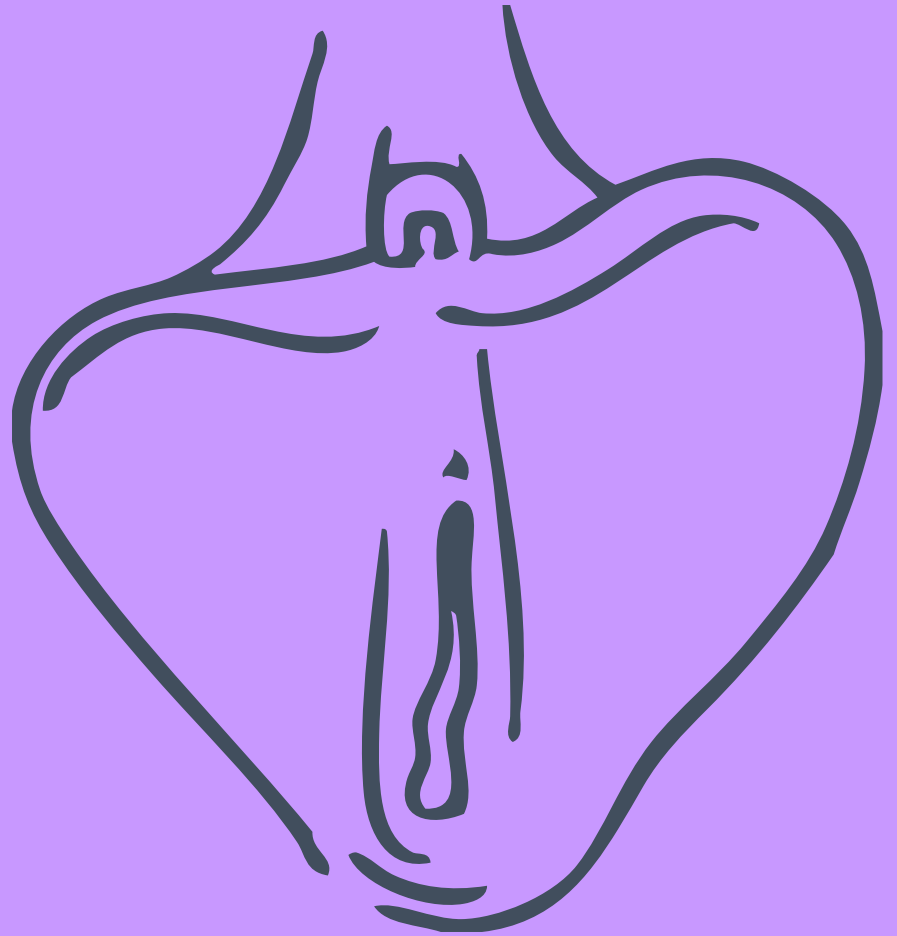
Some fabrics aren't very breathable and if your knickers or clothes are also tight then this can lead to chafing and sore labia.

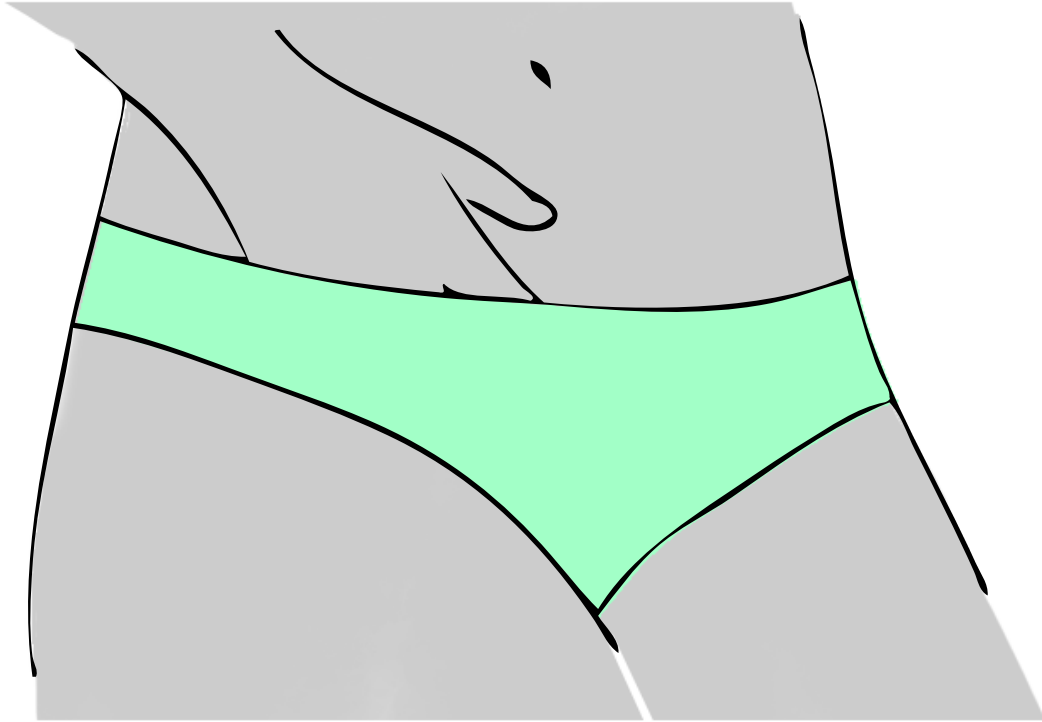
Washing

Some people worry about what they smell like down below - but the vagina should have a natural scent. Excessive washing (particularly inside) can lead to a bacterial imbalance which can smell bad.

Your vagina is self cleaning and you definately don't need to clean inside.

Using perfumed soaps or deodorants on your vulva can irritate the skin and make your labia sore and swollen. It's best to only use water or an unperfumed soap to clean your vulva.



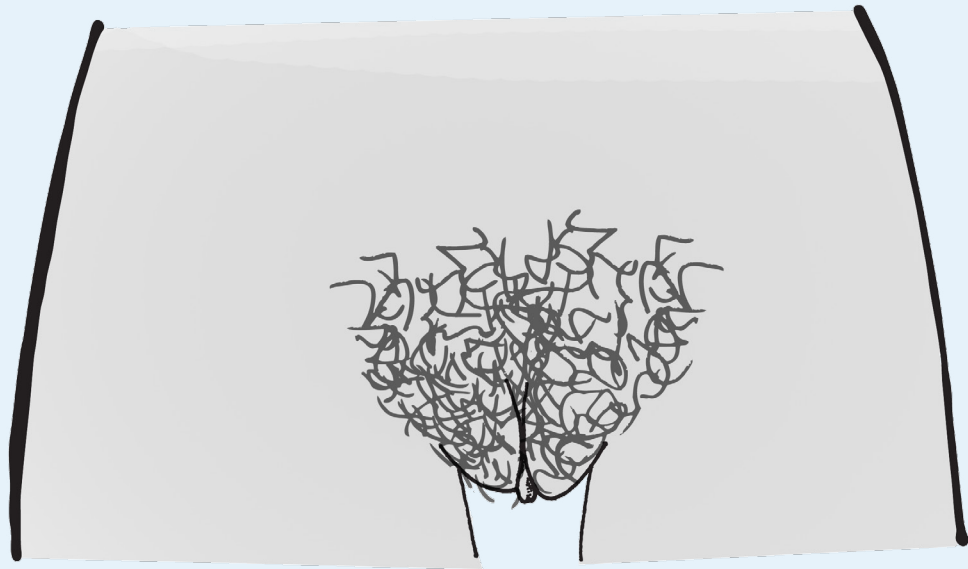


Get to know your vulva

You might like touching your vulva and vagina. Everyone is different in what feels good for them.

Your body belongs to you- exploring is a natural part of growing up, and looking with a mirror can help you gain knowledge and confidence.

It's normal to feel a bit self conscious about your body and vulva if and when you choose to be intimate with someone. Feeling comfortable happens when you can trust and care about the other person.



I'm worried about my vulva but don't know how to talk about it...



Discussing body changes can be hard, particularly about your vulva. Talking about your worries can help you feel confident that the changes happening are normal.

You can speak to your doctor, school nurse or a healthcare professional at a Brook clinic or sexual health clinic.

Health professionals are used to answering all kinds of questions about labia and vaginas. You can talk everything through and it's confidential.

What happens if you see a health professional?

You could say...

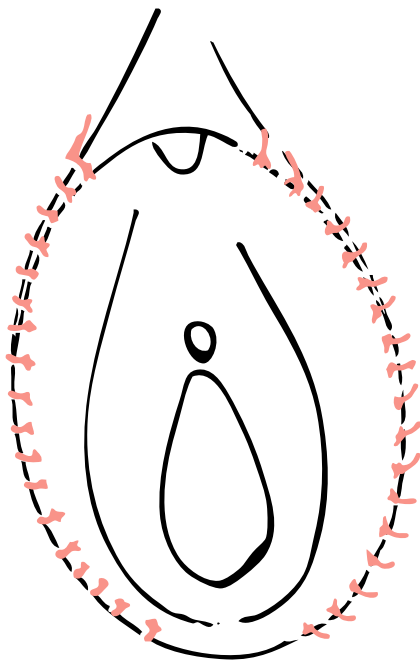
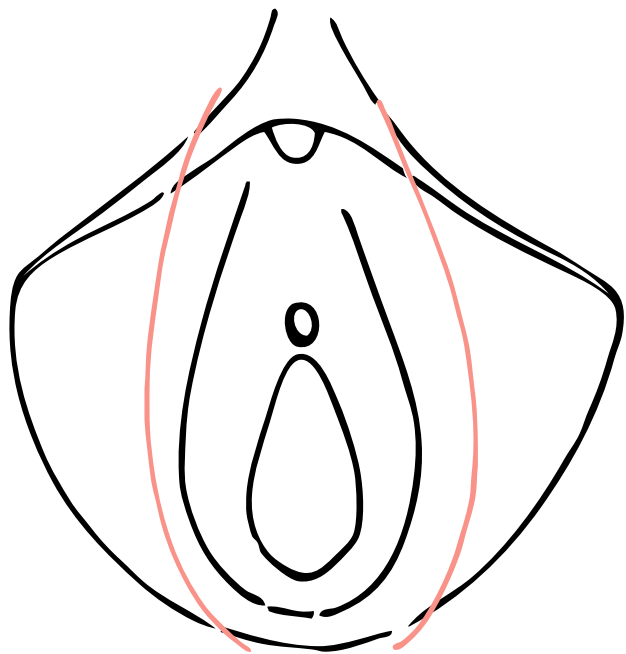
"I'm worried about my vulva. This is something I have been thinking about a lot and I'd like to talk it through with you please."

- They'll talk to you and may even give you this booklet
- They might direct you to some online resources (like the ones listed later)
- They may suggest you show them what you are worried about (but this is will be your choice and if you don't feel comfortable you can say no)

If you don't feel reassured by this then they may offer:

- Counselling to help you think about how you feel about your body
- Referral to a gynaecologist (a doctor who specialises in women's health). This is because they'll want you to be seen by someone with more experience of vulvas





What is a labiaplasty?

If you feel as though your labia are in some way different you may have looked up a type of surgery called 'labiaplasty' which is the technical term for surgery that reduces the size of labia.

As this booklet has talked about and shown in the pictures, peoples labia can vary greatly and do not need to be made smaller. If you're worried, however, don't be afraid to talk to your GP.

Labiaplasty shouldn't be done on those under 18 as the body is still developing. There are also several risks to be aware of including pain, infection, a change or loss in sensation and there is no guarantee you would be happy with the final result.

What's the reality of what I see online?

Searching online for help can be tricky. It's best to stick to reliable sites that give well-balanced advice. But how do you know what information you can trust?

Here are five ways to tell if a website is reliable

- Look for sites from places like Brook, Bish, NHS choices
- Is the website selling anything? They might be trying to get your money more than they actually want to offer helpful information
- Does the author of the information have an agenda? (Think why do they want you to read the information?)
- Check the Date: when was the article written?
- Does the site look professional?



For more information

www.brook.org.uk

www.bishuk.com

www.labialibrary.org.au

www.britspag.org



We hope this booklet helps you with some of the questions or worries you have and can help guide you with further research.

Trust that your vulva is developing as it should be. Don't be afraid to seek advice - you're not alone!

This booklet has been developed by a team with expertise in adolescent gynaecology (including Hazel Isabella Learner, Louise Williams & Clare Oakland) based at University College London Hospital in collaboration with Brook.
Illustrations & design by Hazel Isabella Learner

The resource has been commissioned by BritSPAG - and a PDF version is available online at BritSPAG.



