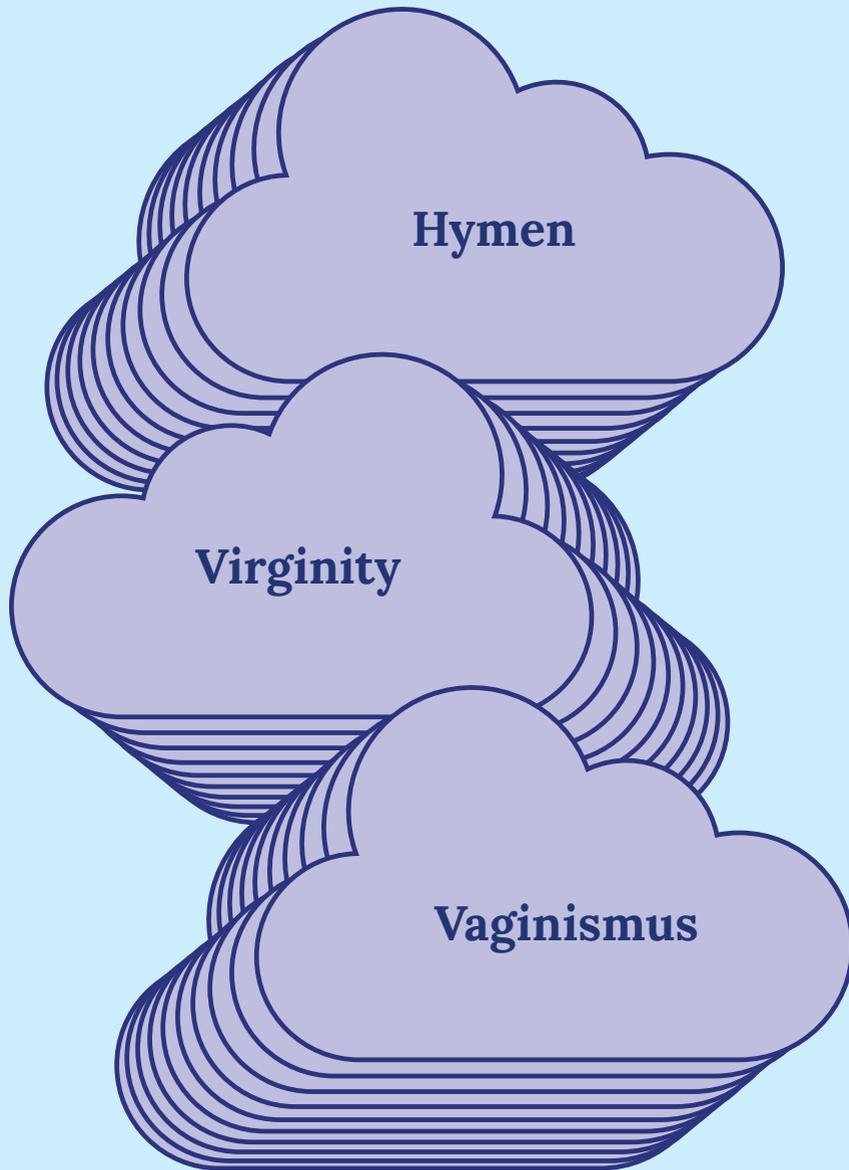


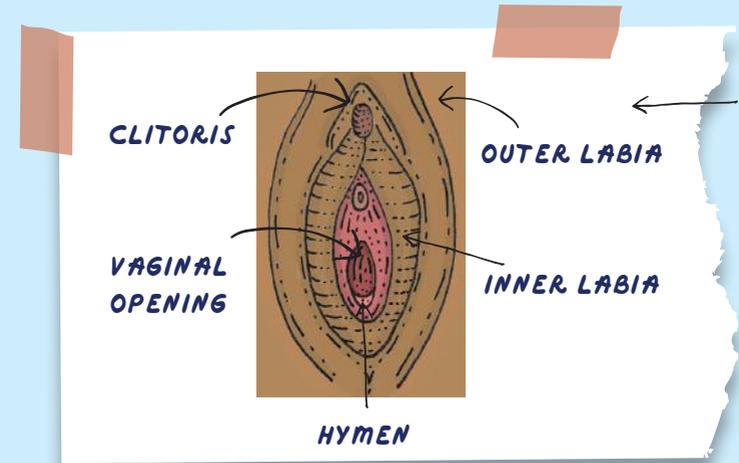
# Breaking Myths

LEVEL 2



## What is a Hymen?

The hymen is a thin membrane that surrounds the opening of the vagina. Not all hymens look the same - some people are born with extra hymen tissue and some are born without one. The most common hymen is shaped like a half moon. This shape allows menstrual blood to flow out of the vagina. Tampons can be inserted through the opening of the hymen without changing the shape of the hymen.



## Does having a hymen mean you're a virgin?

Sexual intercourse may stretch the hymen to make a larger opening or may cause a tiny tear or change in the shape of the hymen. Sometimes this is called **breaking** the hymen, but it doesn't really break - it just stretches.

Some people believe that you're not a virgin if your hymen is stretched open. But having a hymen and being a virgin are not the same thing. Some people are born with hymens that are naturally open. Many other activities besides sex can stretch your hymen, such as horse-riding. So you can't tell if someone has had sex by the way their hymen looks or feels.

It's true that the hymen can tear during intercourse, physical activity, or when a tampon is inserted. But the hymen does not "break," and **virginity is an emotional and a socio-cultural concept**, not just the disruption of a piece of tissue that a woman may or may not have been born with.

### Why is the hymen so culturally important?

The hymen is the name of legend and lore in many cultures, and the treasured prize a woman gives her husband on their wedding night. There have been cases in different cultures where people have forced women to undergo pseudo-scientific 'virginity tests' which have no factual basis and stems from a will for others to control women's sexuality.

The concept of female "virginity" has a complicated history, and has often been incorrectly linked to breaking the hymen. Bleeding after intercourse was thought to be proof of an unbroken hymen, which was considered a proof that a woman had not had sex before. The reality, however, is that the state of your hymen has nothing to do with sexual activity. As for how to know if your hymen is broken, it's near impossible to see it by yourself.

*"[THE HYMEN IS] NOT IN THE SCRIPTURES, NOT IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH...AGAIN. I'M SURE THEY'D BE PART OF THE CULTURES AND THE FOLK RELIGION IN NATIONS WHERE CHRISTIANITY EXISTS. BUT NEVER AT THE BEHEST OF THE CHURCH."*

- FATHER JONATHAN, READ MORE ON PG 203

#### Myth



Using tampons and menstrual cups as a virgin will break the hymen and take a woman's virginity.

#### Fact



An intact hymen does not indicate if you're a virgin or not. Virginity has to do with sexual activity, not the presence of a hymen.

## Breaking your hymen

### "Will it hurt when my hymen breaks?"

Not necessarily. Breaking your hymen during intercourse can hurt but not all women feel pain, and some don't feel anything at all. However, painful intercourse is a reality for many women, and there are a handful of health conditions that can contribute to it, such as vaginismus.

### What is vaginismus?

Vaginismus is a condition involving a muscle spasm in the pelvic floor muscles. Vaginismus can make it painful/difficult or impossible to have sexual intercourse, to undergo a gynaecological exam, and to insert a tampon. Vaginismus is a physical condition, but it's a psychological condition as well. The main cause is psychological fear.

The reasons might be:

- bad first sexual experience
- trauma of rape
- sexual abuse
- lack of sexual knowledge
- religious beliefs and teachings



#### Food For Thought



Incorrect beliefs about sex, taboos, and fear around insertion can have mental and physical effects on your body! You should know it's okay to feel nervous about inserting something, but doing so will not make you "impure".

## "Will my hymen change shape?"

When you go through puberty and start menstruating, the estrogen that is made by your ovaries may change the appearance of your hymen and also cause it to become very elastic. Because of this, your hymen will become more susceptible to stretching.

The first time you have vaginal sex, your hymen may not even be there for a variety of reasons, like physical exercise, tampons, or menstrual cups. If it's still there, however, it can cause temporary bleeding or discomfort. Once your hymen has been stretched out, it won't grow back, but that's OK!

## "If my hymen is stretched out, does that mean I'm not a virgin?"

Nope! As previously stated, your hymen can be ruptured without knowing from numerous activities that don't involve sex at all. So, your hymen has nothing to do with virginity.

## "How does menstrual blood pass through the hymen?"

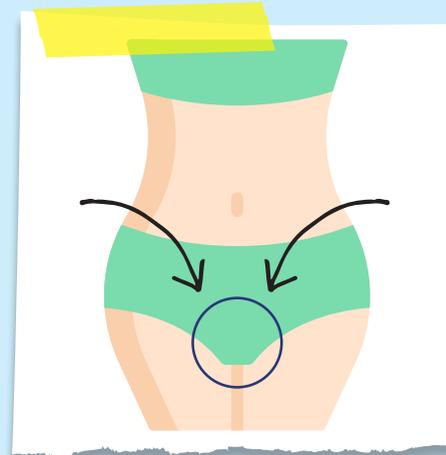
The hymen has one or more holes to let blood through naturally. In most girls, the hymen looks like a doughnut and has one large hole that can let one or two fingers in. Much less common are hymens with two holes, like nostrils. Some even have several small holes!

## Get to Know Your Body Better

### Pelvic floor exercises

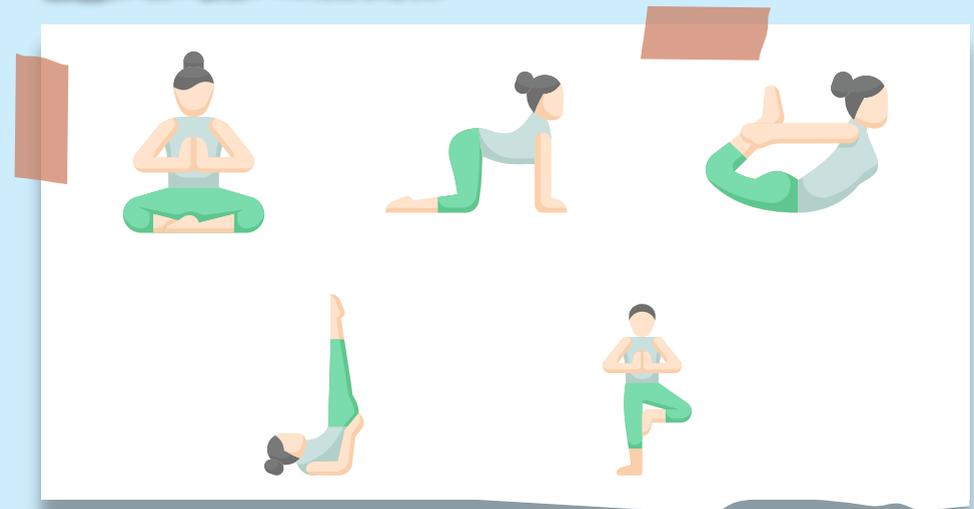
Pelvic floor exercises have been known to help relax muscles around your pelvis.

*I'VE BEEN DOING THESE EXERCISES AND I HAVE FELT THE DIFFERENCE! - A.*



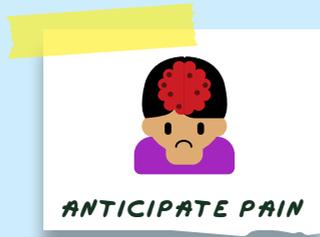
### Kegel Exercise

To work your pelvic floor muscles, sit comfortably and clench the muscles for 10-15 seconds. It should feel like you are holding in your pee. Don't hold your breath or tighten your stomach, buttocks or thigh muscles.

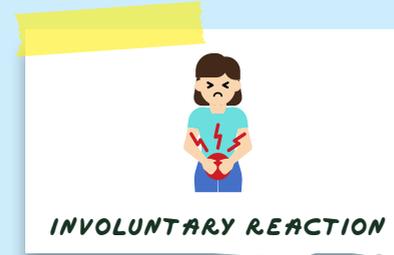


Try some of these yoga poses while you do the kegel exercise!

# Cycle Of Vaginismus



The body anticipates pain and might experience fear and anxiety



The body automatically tightens vaginal muscles



Avoidance of intimacy and lack of desire may develop



Tightness makes sex painful and penetration may be impossible



Body remembers experience and braces for pain on an ongoing basis



Pain reinforces and intensifies

Breaking myths

Breaking myths

