Dear Alice,

I am (still!) a virgin and have a question about the hymen. I know mine is not entirely intact, because I did a lot of horseback riding as a child. But as I'm not a tampon-user (nor wish to become one), I'm not exactly sure how painful intercourse will be, for the first time, nor what will happen to the hymen.

I always assumed it was a thin membrane that, upon penetration, would shrink evenly to the sides. But I seem to have what you might call a flesh tab, and though I've looked at pictures offered in Our Bodies, Ourselves, I'm not sure I understand how an opening will be created, and have the horrifying idea that a piece of flesh is going to drop out or be torn right out of me. Is it normal to have a flesh tab? What will happen to it? And if I tried inserting a tampon, would that facilitate the tearing process? Please help.

Yours,

Tawanda

Answer

Dear Tawanda,

The hymen is a thin membrane that partially blocks the opening of the vaginal vaginal entrance, with space or spaces for menstrual fluid (your period) to flow through. Hymens can be stretched or torn during the first experience of sexual penetration, or with tampon use or other non-sexual activity. It can also be stretched with fingers. Some females are born without a hymen. Once torn or stretched, the hymen becomes an irregular ring of tissue around the vaginal opening.

Whether you're horseback riding, using a tampon, or having sex, that flesh tab is not going to fall out! This need not cause you any concern. This flesh tab will shrink to the sides of the vagina following increased pressure on the hymen, due to the insertion of a tampon, penis, or other object into your vagina.

You can also stretch your hymen yourself through a relatively simple procedure. Place a finger into your vagina (you can slick it up first with lube) and apply pressure on the vaginal entrance by pressing downward toward the anus. Keep the pressure on for a few minutes, and then release it. Repeat this procedure several times, each time with a little more pressure. Then insert two fingers and apply pressure to the sides of the vaginal entrance, in addition to
the downward stretching. You can repeat this process over several days in order to help reduce any discomfort during your first vaginal intercourse. However, it is always good to remember that not all women experience pain the first time they have sex; in fact, for the majority of women (though every female is different), the first coital experience is generally nontraumatic, with limited discomfort and minor (if any) bleeding.

It’s great that you are reading up on your body. Keep on perusing the literature (including the related Q&As) for more information. If you are still curious about hymen stretching, perhaps you can ask questions to friends or family members who have experienced hymen stretching. They may be able to give you a more personal account of their feelings (both physical and mental) following their first times, whether that be tampon use, solo-sex, or intercourse.

Alice!
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