Labia lowdown! (Or, is what I've got "normal"?) [1]

(1)
Dear Alice,

Are the inner lips of the vagina supposed to be "longer" OR "shorter" than the outer lips? Also, my right inner lip is longer than my left inner lip. Like, a lot longer. My right inner lip sticks out from my outer lips and is very visible. Is this abnormal? Thank you :]

? Disproportionate

(2)
Dear Alice,

Is it normal for the inner labia to be different sizes? One lip is somewhat "thicker" and has a lumpy looking edge while the other is thinner and straight. Plus, should they be closed together or do they open up a bit? Mine are closed together unless I pull them apart with my fingers.

? Wondering

Answer

Dear Disproportionate and Wondering,

Long, short, small, big, smooth, lumpy ? are just some of the descriptors for perfectly normal labia (the outer and inner lips of the vulva [2]). The outer lips, or labia majora, are two fatty pads, usually covered with pubic hair. Between are the inner lips, or labia minora, two folds or flaps (like butterfly wings) of skin that join at the sensitive clitoral hood at the top, and thin out near the vaginal opening. What the descriptors don?t do, however, is accurately flesh out what your labia do for you. Both the labia majora and minora help to keep bacteria out of the vagina and their concentration of nerve endings increase genital sensation during sexual encounters. The thing is, Disproportionate and Wondering, when it comes to the labia, disproportion or asymmetry is commonplace.

Women's labia are as unique as the individual woman ? ranging in size (from 3/4 of an inch to two inches on average), shape, color, and texture. Think of the labia as petals of a rare exotic flower. Some labia are short, thick, and lumpy or "ruffled." Others are long, thin, and smooth and may hang beyond the labia majora. Some labia are closed together. Others lie farther apart. Some even vary in size and color from left to right and front to back! So, if your labia
have always looked this way, then this is "normal" for you. During puberty and throughout life as bodies mature, your labia may change due to hormones, pregnancy and childbirth, or simply because of aging.

Some women have explored their labia but, like the two of you, wonder if they are "normal." Others have not yet looked at their own genitals. Looking at your vulva in a mirror allows you to become more familiar with your one-of-a-kind flower. Knowing what your labia usually looks like and regularly performing this basic self-exam will help you detect any changes that may cause concern (if you do notice changes, consider making an appointment with a health care provider). It may also be helpful to think about the source(s) of these labial insecurities. Are you simply curious about what is considered normal? Has someone commented on the size or shape of your labia? American standards of beauty affect us in different ways? Could the desire for symmetry be influenced by a perfection-obsessed media?

In any case, gaining confidence in how your labia or vulva appear may take time. But rest assured, you both are 100 percent normal. For more encouragement and food for thought on labia, vulvas, and body image, check out Our Bodies, Ourselves [3], a groundbreaking book written by women for women.

Alice!
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