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? IS A BREAST SELF-EXAM A WASTE OF TIME?

I feel so many lumps when I check my breasts...some from my bones, some from milk ducts and some I just don't know! I worry that I can't tell normal lumps from cancer. My gyno said I need to "learn" my breasts, but that doesn't set my mind at ease. What do you advise?

Breast self-exams (BSEs)

can be tricky, especially since breast cancer takes various forms: a noticeable lump, or no lump at all...pain, or not a bit of discomfort. And to be truthful, not all doctors think BSEs are helpful. Some concerns: Questionable lumps cause major anxiety and often lead to unnecessary testing. Plus, BSEs aren't proven to decrease breast cancer deaths.

That said, I advise women who feel BSEs are more stress than they're worth—and any woman over 40 or with a family history of breast cancer—to get an annual mammogram instead. If your breasts are naturally lumpy, request a digital mammogram. This allows for sharper contrast between tissue types, so a suspicious lump is more easily detected.

? CAN AN HERB INCREASE MY FERTILITY?

I've been trying to get pregnant for two years, but with my irregular periods, it's been hard to know when I'm ovulating. Fertility treatments cost thousands, so I felt encouraged when a friend said herbs may help. Can you recommend any?

You might want to try chasteberry. In one small study, 32 percent of women with fertility problems who took

chasteberry became pregnant within three to six months. The plant triggers a downshift in the hormone progesterone, which allows menstruation to occur, plus increases production of ovulation-regulating luteinizing hormone. The result: Menstruation is restored or normalized, and the body more reliably releases an egg. Users reported no

side effects, but you should stop use once pregnant. A study-backed brand to try: Fertility Blend for Women (\$30 for 90 capsules, at FertilityBlend.com and GNC stores).

"This herb helps 32% of women conceive in less than six months."

—Elizabeth Gunther Stewart, M.D.

? YIKES! IS MY VAGINAL DISCHARGE NORMAL?

Last week my husband saw my stained panties in the laundry and was like, "Is that normal?" And I didn't know! For six months I've been getting chalky, yellowish brown stains that won't wash away. There's no odor, but my periods have gotten heavier. So, is this normal?

Discharge that is yellow with a tinge of brown, red or pink and dries chalky can be the result of fibroids. The color is from bleeding of the uterine wall, and the texture is from built-up dead skin cells and inflammation-fighting white blood cells. Heavy periods are also a sign. A gynecological exam or ultrasound can detect fibroids, and treatment may involve surgical removal or embolization, a procedure that cuts off circulation to the fibroids so they shrink.

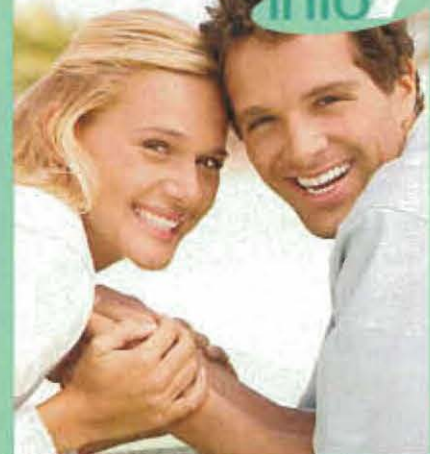
As for your underwear, mix 1 tsp. or so of baking soda with enough water to make a paste; apply to the stains. Let sit for an hour, then launder in cold water.



Put First to work for you!

Elizabeth Gunther Stewart, M.D., FACOG, is a gynecologist with a specialty practice in vulvovaginal care and the author of *The V Book: A Doctor's Guide to Complete Vulvovaginal Health* (Bantam). To ask her a question, e-mail her at privatehealth@firstforwomen.com, or write to her at Dr. Stewart, First magazine, 270 Sylvan Avenue, Englewood Cliffs, NJ 07632.

handy info



The scientific clue that he's marriage material

A new study reveals that 72 percent of women's gut-instinct responses to photos of men's faces actually matched up with the men's honest attitudes toward sex and relationships. The basic finding: Men with softer facial features tend to be seeking long-term relationships, while men with more masculine features, like a square jaw, are looking for something less serious.

SOURCE: *Evolution & Human Behavior*, 2008

Back pain can signal post-baby depression

New mothers whose pelvic and lower-back pain continues long after their six-week follow-up exam are three times more likely to be suffering from postpartum depression. The exact reason is unclear, but the study authors hypothesize that there is a link between the neurochemical imbalances that underlie depression and an enhanced sensation of pain. Researchers are hopeful that this physical red flag will enable more suffering mothers to seek treatment for this hard-to-recognize emotional condition.

SOURCE: Birgitta Öberg, Ph.D., professor, department of health and society, Linköping University, Sweden