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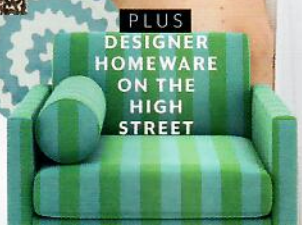
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'vulva or vagina?' quiz). 'Most people don't get a comprehensive sex education and, unfortunately, most doctors are also uncomfortable with these conversations,' says Dr Jen Gunter, gynaecologist and author of *The Vagina Bible*. Which is where these start-ups specialising in intimate health are making leaps and bounds. 'Companies like Lady Suite are opening up the conversation, and lead with educating consumers. The realities of intimate skin irritation or dryness are just a few of the topics that address what women may be experiencing,' continues Chiu.

TREAT YOURSELF

Treatments like vaginal rejuvenation are also on the rise – and it's not only women post-childbirth or menopause considering them. A study by Always Discreet found that 64% of 18 to 24-year-olds experience some form of bladder weakness as a result of intensive exercise regimes that put the pelvic floor and bladder under strain, or restrictive diets that cause constipation, putting pressure on the pelvic floor muscles.

Using radiofrequency to create a thermal effect to restore collagen and elastin fibres inside the vagina, Epilium & Skin's Viveve treatment (epilium.co.uk; price on request) promises better lubrication, more bladder control and a firmer support structure. In just 30 minutes, the probe will have emitted enough radiofrequency to repair any internal issues that could be causing weakness or pain. A more convenient 'clothes on' option is The Light Salon's new 'Kegel Throne' at Harvey Nichols (£175). Perch on a vibrating chair for 28 minutes, during which your pelvic floor muscles will be subjected to 11,000 Kegel exercises via electromagnetic currents to tone pelvic floor muscles for better control.

Elsewhere, Kay Greveson, founder of Regents Park Aesthetics, recommends VJuve Vaginal Rejuvenation (£500). 'Our treatment is FDA approved and uses CO₂ fractional lasers rather than heat,' explains Greveson. With no risk of damaging the cell walls, it's used to treat dyspareunia (painful sex) and vaginal atrophy (thinning and drying of the vaginal walls) and also helps restore the correct pH within the vagina by eliminating unhealthy bacteria. But it's not permanent. 'As with all laser treatments, the epithelial vaginal wall tissues will gradually

return to normal over time,' says Greveson. About 18 months, in this case.

SELF-CARE DOWN UNDER

If you prefer a less invasive, more holistic approach, there's always vaginal steaming or 'douching', a process made notorious by Gwyneth Paltrow after she recommended it on goop.com. There's a misconception that the steaming is to clean the vagina; in actual fact, it's a traditional method that has been used for centuries to help women overcome gynaecological problems. 'In Ayurveda, this is seen as an essential practice for women, from when they get their first period to menopause,' explains Jo Webber, head of herbal education at Pukka Herbs. 'Herbs such as triphala, shatavari, aloe vera, rose and liquorice are often boiled and cooled to make a vaginal douche.'

Medical herbalist Victoria Kearns is another advocate. 'It's based on steaming herbs under the vulva and vagina that are known to tone and strengthen the reproductive tissues, along with warming herbs to improve circulation to the pelvic organs,' she explains. She prescribes it for everything from painful periods to fertility.

It might sound a bit Mother Earth but, if you're not convinced of the medical benefits, you may find the emotional element of it more persuasive. A 20-minute session spent sitting over a warm and comforting bowl of herbs could well be the time we need to reconnect with ourselves in a bid to unwind and de-stress – a bit like meditation... or masturbation. Or why not combine the two?

'Intimate care has already expanded from remedying vaginal discomfort to the next level of self-care: self-sex,' says Chui. 'DIY sex is being repositioned as the new wellbeing treatment, akin to meditation or going for a run, and new services are launching, such as Ferly – an audio guide for mindful sex that merges masturbation and meditation.' Providing everything from sensual stories to get you in the mood to guided practices where you can breathe your way to an orgasm, you can even filter your preferences to suit your environment (in bed/alone, etc). Proof that the taboo around masturbation and lady parts has finally been lifted. Just remember to turn on the right meditation app when you're staying at the in-laws.

ON THE VAGENDA

Should you want to try products, be sure that they're pH-balanced, free of alcohols, parabens, phthalates, fragrance, foaming agents and always keep it external.

FUR Fur oil, £46, net-a-porter.com

This cult oil (famously loved by Emma Watson) is filled with hydrating jojoba, tea tree and clary sage, known to quell irritation. It was designed to be applied post-shave or wax for bump-free bikini lines.

The Perfect V Beauty Mist, £23, harveynichols.com

Rose water isn't just great for the face. Combined with antioxidants like cloudberry and bilberry, it also makes skin more resilient, reducing the risk of shaving rash.

Optibac Probiotics for Women, £17.99, optibacprobiotics.co.uk

Ensuring yeasts and bacteria that cause things like thrush, cystitis and bacterial vaginosis don't get a look in, these were developed especially for supporting down below.

Intimina KegelSmart, £76.42, intimina.com

With an app-based exercise programme that sets your level, pop this in for just five minutes a day and start flexing to strengthen your pelvic floor.

DeoDoc Daily Intimate Wash, £19.50, cultbeauty.co.uk

Developed by gynaecologists, this sensitive wash won't mess with the vagina's very particular pH but will leave you feeling fresh.

Ohne Anti-Teardrops 1% CBD Oil, £27, ohne.co

Rub on your stomach or pop in your bath and wait for the essential oils and hemp extract to naturally soothe period pain.



PHOTOS: STOCKSY, GIANANDREA TRAINA



THE V SPOT

V-care, body literacy, intimate health... what lies beneath your briefs is beauty's latest focal point. But do you need these products? *Becci Vallis* goes down under to investigate

YOU MAY HAVE HEARD OF Fui, Lady Suite, Qsoon V and TWO LIPS - independent brands that are leading the way in 'intimate health', ie, products for your vagina. And, if you have, you probably assumed they were quite niche. But according to global trend forecaster WGSN, the industry is expected to grow 7.2% by 2024, reaching a net worth of £28.5 billion. With those numbers involved, it's no surprise that mainstream retailers are following suit. Take cult beauty brand, which launched its Sensual Pleasure and Wellness category earlier this year, as customers can splash out on sex toys and lubricate while stocking up on chic nappies from brands like Charlotte Tilbury and NARS. As well as green lighting intimate self-care, the e-commerce site is also donating 10% of profits to The Lady Garden Foundation, which raises awareness and funds research into gynaecological cancers. But why now? And are any of these new products actually necessary?

HEADING SOUTH

Some believe the surge in these products is a result of women in the public eye, and our

peers, openly discussing and destigmatising periods, menopause and childbirth on social media, as part of a wider societal shift. "Women sharing their stories means that more honest and open conversations are taking place," explains Justin Harrison, Wellbeing Guide at holistic spa Gazette House. "It helps us to be more compassionate of one another, as well as encouraging women and girls to feel empowered to listen, share and speak up."

The wellness boom has played a part too. "Consumers are embracing subjects that were once considered taboo, like vaginal health," explains Emma Chin, creative innovation director at trends agency JWT Intelligence. "Vaginal health is known as 'body literacy', which is educating women on the female anatomy so they are able to better care for themselves down there."

And as it turns out, we really could do with a little educating. A recent YouGov report revealed that 45% of women can't correctly identify which part of their genitals is the vagina, while 43% were unable to locate the labia (if you need a refresher, visit femfresh.co.uk and take their