

Dr. Aziza Sesay: Understanding the vulva, vagina and cervix

Joyce 0:02

Joyce, hi. I'm Joyce Harper, Professor of reproductive science at the Institute for Women's Health at University College London. Welcome to season three of my podcast. Why didn't anyone tell me this? This season, we'll be diving into topics that explore how to achieve good health and happiness. I'll be speaking with leading experts who will provide evidence based advice and debunk some of the many myths around our health. Additionally, I'll be having conversations with individuals who bring unique perspectives through their lived experiences. In season three, will cover a diverse range of topics, including reproductive anatomy, inspiring female icons, chronic health conditions, factors that influence our well being, and global women's health issues. I really hope you enjoy season three of Why didn't anyone tell me this

welcome to the first podcast of season three in the mini series on understanding reproductive anatomy. And who better to start us off for the discussion of the vulva, vagina and the cervix, but Dr Aziza. Cesay. Aziza is a GP GP educator, honorary senior clinical lecturer, host speaker, and a well regarded health content creator. She is particularly noted for her work in health education, awareness, advocacy and empowerment through her platform, talks with Dr cesay this platform shares evidence based health information with a focus on women's health, cancer awareness, mental health and health inequality. She has been a GP for the last 10 years. She is the vice chair and creative director of black female doctors UK, and serves as an ambassador for multiple health charities, including the Eve appeal, well being of women, the faculty of sexual and reproductive health, Hatfield vision and keep it facts. Aziza is regularly featured in the media, such as on BBC News, The Guardian and women's health UK. She has played a pivotal role in several national public health campaigns, her commitment to improving health outcome and addressing health inequalities has earned her recognition and respect, including a Point of Light Award. Welcome Aziza.

Aziza Sesay 2:36

Hello. How's it going? Joy. Thank you so much for having me. Oh,

Joyce 2:40

it's always great to see you're so full of energy. I know we're going to have a wonderful podcast today. So I always start by asking my guests why they chose their career. So what? Why did you want to become a doctor specializing in women's health?

Aziza Sesay 2:57

Yeah, oh my god, I'm gonna start with the cheesy beginning, but we all said in medical school. But the truth is, genuinely, I wanted to be a doctor to help people. That's just always been my premise. And obviously, through the years, you get exposed to disparities and inequities that exist. And I'm a woman, I'm experiencing myself, especially as a black, Muslim woman, woman, and I have four sisters. I've literally grown up around women, so it's been a passion of mine for the longest time. And obviously as a GP, as a female GP, majority of my patients are women, because you tend to see a female GP, but I sort of fell into this platform, so my talks with Dr sisse

kind of just happened unexpectedly. I was already doing community talks for my local community, and women's talks, and unfortunately, because of the pandemic, it meant lockdown, and we couldn't do it anymore, and I was getting crazy messages being sent around. Do you remember all the WhatsApp messages and all the disinformation, misinformation and people who are really vulnerable believing it, that was triggering me. But also I had my aunt call me ecstatic that her blood pressure was finally normal, and so she was going to stop taking her blood pressure. And I was

Unknown Speaker 4:14
like, right, that's it.

Aziza Sesay 4:17
This needs to change. They need the education. They don't even know the basics. So I started doing zoom talks, and then through there, I started creating health videos, and through there, obviously it sort of focused in on women's health, because again, that's one that's highly exploited. I remember the first time I met you. We were at a conference, and you said a line I'll never forget where you said that we need to ensure that we empower women and not exploit them. And I think that's that's really, really key, because that, unfortunately, is the current climate that we're in. So it's all about empowering everybody, not just women, with the information about women's and gynecological health, and hopefully saving lives and improving outcomes in the process. Wow,

Joyce 4:59
yeah. Yeah, it's, I remember saying that, and I've used that quote a lot since then, because I think it's so, so important. But you know, just today, I've read that they've shut down some conference in Australia because the actually two doctors are speaking, and they're big influencers, but lots of people don't agree with what they're saying. And, you know, we are, it's so it's so difficult for women, because you and I want to educate them, and we always tell them to listen to the doctors, and then it's even more confusing. But, you know, I get the best people on my podcast. Here you are. Can I just ask you something else? Actually, you've got the most great accent. So where were you brought up?

Aziza Sesay 5:44
Oh, wow. Thank you so much for asking. So a lot of people assume that I'm American, and often when I'm walking down the street, someone hears my accent like, Oh, welcome to the UK. But I've actually lived here for 22 years. I was born and raised in Saudi Arabia, and we had American teachers. I went to international school, and I lived there until I was 15, and then I moved to the UK. So if you whoever is really quick at that scenario, if you know how old I am now, but yeah, this is where the accent is from. I have family who live in the States as well, and I'm there all the time. So can't get rid of it,

Joyce 6:16
no, but I love it. I love it because it's, it's not your full on American accent. It's, it's, I love it. It's sort of soft, and, yeah, it's great. It's great. Be proud of it. Now I am going to get straight in with our vagina and vulva. So you and I get very annoyed. I've seen you post

so many times people using these words wrong, vagina and vulva. Yeah, so today we are going to get it right and I love the word vulva and some people hate it. So let's start. Let's start. You. Can you tell us what is a vulva and what is a vagina?

Aziza Sesay 6:58

Of course, and you know what? Actually, I know we get irritated, but I often say that it's not anybody's fault. Actually, it's our upbringing. It's the generational shame that's been passed down. And unfortunately, this is something that is living on now. And I'm gonna share this really quick story, because I'm really passionate and a little bit disappointed by this. It's my my you know, my daughter is currently having issues with using the word, even though that's what she was taught from the very beginning. It's vulva, it's vulva, and she's very confident. And unfortunately, she has friends who are saying to her, that's a bad word. Don't say, don't say, you need to say private parts. And every time I'm encouraging, she comes back and says, but I said it, and they keep looking at me disapprovingly. And she's six years old, so unfortunately, it's an education that needs to go across generations, from children to their grown ups to their grown ups, grown ups and so on and so forth. And until we nip it in the bud, will not change the narrative. And unfortunately, there will be that shame and stigma and taboo associated which is leading Well, I often say it's costing lives, not just people's livelihood, but their ability to live, and also shortening their lifespan. But that's all by the way. So if we're talking about vulva versus vagina, vulva is the external part of the female genital anatomy, or the external gynecological anatomy. If you want to go there, I have so many props, and I know that this is mostly video, but I'm always carrying around different props. I have this one. I have my favorite crochet vulva, and it's made up of different parts. Okay, so the vulva at the very top, the cushion bit that has hair, but you can move the hair if you want. It's called the mons pubis. So this protects the pubic bone, and then we move downwards into fuller outer lips. That's often called labia majora. But I don't like that term, because it makes it sound like it should always be bigger than everything, and I'll explain why, why in a minute, but it essentially it protects the inner areas. So as we go adjacent, so inwards from the outer lips, we have the inner lips, okay, or the labia minora, so minor, meaning small. And again, I think that name is a bit of a misnomer, and it can cause confusion. It can lead to a lot of insecurity and shame, because if yours doesn't look small, it's like, what's wrong with me? But it's just remembering there's so many diverse, different types, and everyone has their own, so that those are the inner lips, and when we go inwards in even further, we have what's called the vestibule, and this is where our urethral opening. So urethra is the tube that carries P from the bladder to the outside the opening is on that bit of the vestibule. And then just lower down we have the vaginal opening. Keyword, the vaginal opening, so not the vagina, it is the opening that leads into the vagina. Okay, and then as we go downwards. We have what's called the perineum, which is what connects the vagina to the anus, the skin that connects that. And then if we go upward to my favorite vo organ, the clitoris, it's a tiny nugget that we see on the outside, but actually it's quite big because it has its own internal structure. Because this isn't visual, I'm not going to show you, but essentially, we see about a 10th of the whole clitoral complex. Okay? And what covers the clitoral complex? When the labia minor, or the inner lips come together at the top is the clitoral hood, so that covers, protects the clitoris, so it doesn't always fully cover the clitoris, and again, diversity in vulvas. So that is the vulva. The vagina, in very

simple terms, is the inner tube that connects the outside to the inside, so the womb and so on, the internal structures. And it's where, you know, period blood comes out. It's where fun things go in, like penises firm and all of that jazz. And remember this? Okay, I didn't make this up. This is Karen Hobbs from Eva peel. Remember that vagina when you spell it, it has the word in that to be the reminder that vagina is on the inside. Everything else that you see on the outside is the vulva. And just to say and emphasize here, neither of those two words are bad words. They are just words like our head, our shoulders, our knees, our toes and all of that. So please say it with pride, and let's remove the shame and stigma. I'm like, I'm so passionate about these stigmatizing women's health.

Joyce 11:39

I love it. I love it at conferences. Sometimes, when I'm giving talks about women's health, I make everyone stand up and shout out, vulva.

Aziza Sesay 11:49

Yes, I do the exact like, usually in the beginning of my talks, I'm always like, you know what this is? And everyone I will have half people saying vagina and others saying vulva, and then majority of people just quiet because they're like, oh my god, what is that? That looks rude? Someone actually said to me, Oh, that looks a bit rude. I'm like, It's not rude. It's just a part of the body. But yeah, no, it just helps, right? With normalizing the terminology. Yeah,

Joyce 12:14

it is crazy, and I don't understand how vulva has become this rude word and mentioning the Eve Eve appeal. I love that about vagina in we that hopefully sticks in everyone's brain. But I was at an event they did years ago, and they were we were talking about the words, and there was a woman there who does a lot of teaching in primary schools, and she says that she doesn't use the word vulva. And we went crazy. The audience went crazy. We were like, we have got to de stigmatize this word. And as you said about what your daughter's friends are saying, parents don't like it. They think it's bad, but we should be teaching our children the correct terminology. And I've said this when we talked about I've got boys, so, you know, I've always taught them as testicles and a penis, and I can remember them coming back from one of their sex EDS, and they said some of the boys had never heard of the word testicles before. Yeah, I was like crazy. So, so one message already, besides what these structures are, is, if you've got kids, use the right words, let's de stigmatize the word Vulva. It's, it's crazy. And Aziza, you mentioned, you mentioned that the opening. So there's a, there's another huge piece of work that's been done where so many people, including women, don't know that women have three holes in this area. So yeah, what do you want to say?

Aziza Sesay 13:42

Yeah, no, okay, so important, I'm really quickly just going back to this school. It's so true. There's a lot of resistance. A lot of people were like, No, a lot of parents who know it's not cute, it's not cute, they often say cute. I recently posted about this on my Instagram and socials, and some were like, it's not cute for kids to say it. I just think it's so wrong. And I'm like, but, but where does that come from? And I often, always ask

that question, why? Why? Why is it not cute to say vulva, but you can say everything else. I'm going to relay a really quick story. If someone shared with me, they were like, okay, you know, I heard what you said, and I went to my son and I told him that his penis is called penis and not I can't remember what she said, but I think maybe ding dong, let's just say ding dong. And and he was like, oh, okay, so that's, that's the real word of my penis. Great. So what's the real word of my elbow? Joe, the real name of my elbow. So you hear like we are the ones that are putting this into our children, who come into this world none the wiser. Like, you know, you teach them words and they just take it for granted. So we're the ones that's instilling the shame and the stigma and taboo, and then we're the ones that are making them uncomfortable in their bodies and making them feel insecure about these terminology and increasing the shame. Absolutely, these are private areas that nobody should touch, and we. To have that discussion about safety and fair enough, but it's important that we use the correct terminology, and we know that. One, it instills confidence. Two, it provides healthy relationships with these parts of the body. It means that when they having issues, they can confidently relay and explain the areas where they're experiencing the pain and discomfort or so on. And finally, and this is a fact, it protects them from sexual predators. You know, if we're using different euphemisms, we've heard stories. There's a little girl whose uncle was molesting her, and she kept trying to tell her mom, uncle is playing my cookies, playing my cookie. And mom was like, Oh, it's just a cookie. It's fine. And it took a long time. Whereas, if you're using the correct terminology, there is no way there will be any confusion. It is clear, and it puts the predators off. It's like, oh no, no, this child is going to go and tell on me. You know what I mean? So that's just so important. I'm so passionate about that as as are you. And then the other thing, so that I hate the use of euphemisms. I just don't see their place. I don't think they're important at all. And in fact, actually, that causes more harm than good. And moving on to the holes down, down there. So I actually say that we have seven okay, yes, three is, are the three big ones, but I always go on about the seven holes. Someone recently, at a conference that we did a few months ago, went up to one of my colleagues and said, Oh, she was talking about vulva. And I got a little bit confused, because, you know, we have our sex hole, which is where the P comes out of. So she thought that there was only one hole, like the sex hole being the vagina, and the pee comes out of that hole as well. So, and this is an older lady, you know, who's gone through menopause, so the education isn't there. And again, it's not her fault. It's just we haven't been educated. Because often, when you talk about these things, a lot of shame, and it's like, I don't want to I don't want to hear about it. I want to talk about it. But yes, we have the urethra, which some people call us pee hole, as I say, that's the um, the opening where the pee comes out of. And then we have the vaginal opening, which is, again, where our period blood comes out, the babies come out, and also where the penis goes in and so on. And then we have the anus, which is where our poo comes out, but in the vulva itself, we have additional holes, so we have what's called Barthelin's glands, and these sit on either side of the vaginal opening, and they release fluids, which help in lubrication during sexual arousals and once we're having sex, And it helps to protect the tissue from friction and cuts and irritation neck, and they also just helps to make sex more enjoyable. And then we also have the Skene's glands, which sit on either side of the urethra, and again, they release fluid and and and again, lubrication to the area during our sexual pleasure. So yeah, then we have two of each of those. So you have two skins

glands which have ducts, and that's where they come out of. So ducts are tubes that basically connects a gland to the outside of where the liquid comes out. And then we have two of the barcelins glands, so that's four. And then we have 123, the urethral opening, vaginal opening, an anus, which altogether makes up seven holes.

Joyce 18:26

So who has learned something already? I'm sure most people listening to that would never have heard the real facts. So thank you so much. That's absolutely brilliant. Now there's another structure that I just want to mention. And I when we originally talked about this, I'd almost forgotten to put it in. But I'm also recording a video with the gynae geek about the womb and the fallopian tubes and the ovaries. And then I realized that what we've missed out is the cervix. And I thought, right, I'm going to ask you about the cervix, because, I mean, it's one of those things. It's joining our vagina and our womb. But can you tell us just a little bit of what's what's the cervix?

Aziza Sesay 19:12

Yeah, so I'm gonna, I'm gonna use my model, but I will make sure I'm descriptive enough so that you all can hear me. So when we talk about the internal gynecological anatomy. If we start from the sort of outer upper outer area, we have the ovaries. On either side, we have the Fallopian or uterine tube. Some people don't like using the term Fallopian they're like, it's just a uterine tube. The uterine tubes that connects it to the womb or the uterus. And then at the neck of the womb, we have a structure that is called the cervix. So the cervix is essentially what connects the womb to the vagina, okay? And the cervix has an inner area as well as an outer area. It has like a tiny, narrow Canal, which then opens up. It a hole in the outer area, and this, this is what's really fascinating about the cervix. It dilates to up to 10 centimeters, right? Because that's, that's how big the space you need for a baby to come out. So usually the hole is really tiny, but it dilates to that big. Um, the importance of the cervix, and I'm glad that we're talking about it today and this month. So today is the first day of cervical cancer prevention week. Cervical cancer is unfortunately a condition that primarily affects younger women, and unfortunately it leads to many deaths. And the reason that it's really disheartening is because it's one of the most preventable cancers. Okay, and we're hoping. The World Health Organization is hoping that it will be eliminated by 2030 and NHS England has pledged to eliminate eradicated from the UK by 2040, so it is preventable. It is a cancer that occurs in the cervix. Now, the reason I was talking about the inner area of the cervix and the outer area of the cervix is because the inner area of the cervix is made up of a different type of cells, made up of different types of cells that we call adenos cells or glandular cells, and then the outer surface of the cervix is made up of what's called squamous cells. And obviously they meet at some point. And that area where they meet is tiny. It's called the transformation zone. And because there's so much happening in that area, that is mostly where cancer tends to occur, and that's why, when you have cervical screening done, there's a brush that we use, and it's shaped in a particular way, so that we can collect enough cells, particularly in that area, so that we can pick up the cells that are probably abnormal or they're Changing or even cancers, and then we can hopefully treat it early. Early detection saves lives. So this is my plea again, another push to you all to please, please go and attend your cervical screening. It honestly could save your life.

Joyce 22:12

Wow, really, really, really important. So, fabulous. Thank you so much for that. So let's go back to our wonderful vulva. What role does the vulva play in our health and pleasure?

Aziza Sesay 22:26

Yes, I love that you're asking this question because you didn't just talk about pleasure, because often when you talk about vulvas, and you know the genitals, you're always thinking about pleasure and sex and that sort of thing. But actually it plays a key role in our health and our overall health as well. So I'm thinking poor four P's is what I thought about. So the first p being protection. So it acts as a protective over layer of protecting the internal gynecological organ, so the vagina and so on. It protects it from bugs, from all the friction of the outside. So the clothing and the irritation, any soaps, or anything from the outside is usually we block it from going internally through the vulva. P being a passageway. You cannot get anything into the vagina without going past the vulva. So it's a passageway into the vulva and then P for pleasure. It does a lot. It has a lot to do with pleasure. And this, again, is why I'm so fascinated by the clitoris, because it was only a couple of years ago that we found out that just this the glands of the clitoris, which is on the outside, that we see it, has over 10,000 nerve endings, 10,000 I mean, why would you have 10,000 nerve endings and not need to have pleasure when you're having sex like, I feel like it's so important that we reiterate the point that women are supposed to have pleasurable sex, painful sex is not normal. So it's rich with loads of nerve endings of vulva, loads and loads of nerve endings to help, again, with sexual pleasure. And as I mentioned before, we have glands that release lubrication again, moisturize the area, which help reduce the friction and helps with the sexual pleasure and the sexual experience. But actually this moisture can help in cleaning the area, and that, again, goes back to its protective qualities. It also works in what I call sort of policing. So that's my final P I hope you remember this. I just thought it was an easy way to remember the different roles of the vulva, but policing in that knowing what your normal is and noticing what the changes are. So this is where I always, always, always push for everybody to know what their normal is. Make sure that they're doing their vocal checks. So using a mirror at least once a month, checking to see what your vulva is doing. Are there any new changes? Is there an area of soreness? Are there any white patches, or any skin changes, skin color changes, any scratches or cuts, or any sort of growths, of changes in molds, or any new moles, those sort of things, if you notice any of those changes, please, please go and get checked out. Majority of the times, it's nothing sinister, but it's just to rule out conditions like and this does happen, vulval cancer, the earlier we detected, the earlier we treated, the more likely that it will be curable and the treatments are less invasive. And also we know that hopefully, then you're more likely to have successful treatment as well. So policing is looking to see if there are any of those changes, and it gives us a clue about whether or not there is irritation happening, there is inflammation, there's infection, and as I say, if there are cancers change as well.

Joyce 25:55

Don't worry everyone about taking notes for that. I'm going to write those, those PS in the show notes so everyone can remember, so they'll be written down as well. So that's really, really important. And yes, you know, checking is so, so important. And you'll be really pleased to know that Professor Helen O'Connell from Australia, who was the one who did all the MRIs on the clitoris and describe she was the person that described it. She's coming on my podcast. So, wow, I know, I know. I just

Aziza Sesay 26:30

tell her. I say, salute. I know, amazing. She basically the dawn. She defied all, all the the odds and the narratives, because nobody wanted to talk about the clitoris. Ah,

Joyce 26:42

so annoying. I'm keeping her podcast till the end, because it's, yeah, she's a legend. I mean, it's ridiculous that this is even in our lifetime. Never mind about Yeah, really recently, anyway, she's done it, and we're there with this beautiful structure, the clitoris. So I'll be talking to her all about the clitoris. So very, very exciting. Now, you mentioned women getting a mirror and having a look. And I think one of the problems, especially with pornography, is that women are very confused about what their vulva should look like, and they think that, you know, there's something abnormal and it doesn't look right, and it's too big. And my colleague, Sarah Crichton, I know, who does some label surgery for medical reasons, has been asked so many times through the years, even from she told me a girl as young as nine, her mother bought her in and said her labia is wrong. She needs to have surgery. So what should What should it look like? I mean, they're all different shapes and sizes. Should we worry about what it looks like?

Aziza Sesay 27:46

Okay? Should I hate the word should, because it's almost like this is what it has to be, and there, there's no room for any changes or any errors, or it has to be this. No, your vulva should not look a certain way your vulva should look like, what it's supposed to look like for you, okay? I cannot emphasize that enough. There are no two vulvas that are exactly the same, okay? And often what we see on illustrations in our books, and again, what we get exposed to in pornography, you always have the most pristine, perfect, looking, symmetrical vulva. And again, it's always peach colored. You know, you always have a white skin vulva again. So if that's all we're being exposed to, of course, there's going to be a lot of discomfort and shame and uncertainty when you look at that and then compare it to yours, like, oh my god, there must be something wrong with me, right? So that's one thing I want to talk about, why it's important to look at your vulva and check yours is so you know what's normal for you. Okay, you can take it all in, right? Know that vulvas, so I kind of spoke about this already, in regards to the outer labia, right? It can be, it can be different colors. The reason I'm always carrying this one, this brown vulva, is because I had so many people who came up to me to say, I have literally never seen a black or brown vulva in my life, ever, and for the first time I felt seen, or for the first time I paid attention to what you were talking about, because I was talking about, you know, potential oval, lichen sclerosus and all these other conditions. Oh, I didn't know it could happen to me, because I've never seen it represented, right? Representation matters. If you can't see it, you can't be it. But knowing that it doesn't have to be symmetrical, and the inner labia is not always tucked

in and small, sometimes you can have an inner labia that sort of protrudes outwards, and that's not abnormal. That's just your normal. Do you know what I mean? And it doesn't mean that you have to have surgery to fix it, but if we're not exposed to these diverse vulvas, of course we're going to worry and think that there's something wrong. And also, and when we look at porn, they never have hair. You can have hair on your vulva. In fact, some people encourage that you have hair because the hair is there for a reason, right? It's supposed to be there as a protective, another protective layer, and as well as keeping the area clean. But that's that's your choice. If you want to remove it, that's fine, but don't feel you have to, because that's what society and porn says. I have this book that one of my friend, basically someone who's become a friend through social media. I helped edit this book, and she managed to get well, by the way, because you guys can't read, um, you guys can't see it. But it's called, this is the vulva. Everything you need to know that you didn't get taught at school by Joe Carroll. So it's just a brief overview on the vulva, but what I like is at the very end of the book, you have 50 different images of normal vulvas, right? Again, it's depicting the different shades, the size, the colors, the folds. Just to reassure everyone that it's normal, one of my friends said to me that a family friend of hers was very, very concerned about, I think their daughter was, like six, their six year olds vulva like, it doesn't look normal. And then she had to give them this book to say, here are the different variations of vulvas for them to be reassured and know that actually that is normal. And when we talk about Labiaplasty, which is what you mentioned, the surgical The surgical removal of different aspects of the bubble. Usually it's a the out of the inner labia that they're changing or they're removing. It is the fastest growing cosmetic surgery. It is the fastest growing one again, and it's because I feel like it's honing into our insecurities that they've built up and they've given us. Nobody is born feeling insecure about their vulva. It's just what we're fed, what society feeds. It's what we're being exposed to. And again, my gripe about porn is, obviously, all genders watch porn, right? But if we talk about specifically to men and boys, if that's what they've grown up watching, and that's what they've grown up being exposed to, as a normal vulva, and then they see a different variation in their partner, and they think something's wrong with you, or they body shame them, that again, will have an influence on that individual, and it may then drive them to have laboplasty them when actually they didn't Need it in the first place, and just quickly touch, touching on Labiaplasty, absolutely. There are some instances where it's necessary. There's some individuals who have inner labias that protrude a lot, and they sort of catch on the clothing, and they're constantly getting irritation and inflammation of the area, constant, have constantly having infection, fair enough, in those instances, they may need to just have a surgery just to make it mildly smaller, not not to remove the whole thing, but it's just remembering the complications that are associated with those sort of surgical procedures. Obviously, there's bleeding risk, there's infection risk, and as I said, it's a highly sensitive area with loads of nerve endings. So we're getting rid of all these nerve endings, which is then going to affect our enjoyments and our pleasure when it comes to sex. And again, if we're removing too much, is it going to affect the way that the moisture is going all around? Would that then affect the long will that cause long term effects and in terms of the cleanliness of the vulva, and then increase the risk of recurring infections in the future, the scarring you know after you've had surgery, how it heals, there are so many long term possible consequences of having this procedure done. So it's just ensuring that everybody's aware of the risks

associated, and they're counseled before they have the procedure done. But also the most important thing is educating, particularly our children and girls and boys, all genders, that vulvas are diverse, and they don't have to all look the same. No two vulvas will ever look the same.

Joyce 34:00

You know, we need that book in schools, but since we can't even seem to say the word in schools, I'm not surprised the schools don't have that book. But we need to show children in schools that the vulvas are different and everyone, every one of all genders, for sure. I mean, it's it's crazy, but as you said, it's not anyone's fault to not know what we're discussing today because we weren't taught it at school. So it's just, it just, it's just crazy. And as you said, all those nerve endings, why would you start having surgery on those beautiful nerves that are going to help us have such pleasure during during sex? So yeah, be very aware. I'm sure people know that porn is not real. It's it's really, really not real. Um, Sarah Crichton has so many stories. One of them was she said a woman told her, Oh, when I go to the gym, I worry about people seeing my vulva. What are you doing? Cartwheel? But. She also did a study where she compared women who were asking for sur labial labial surgery and those women that were coming to a normal gynae clinic. And she published this many years ago, but she measured all their inner and outer lips, and there were no differences at all. So those that thought they had abnormally large lips. That wasn't true. It was just, as you say, that the culture that we're living in. But let's, right, let's, let's talk, you mentioned before about the vaginal secretions. And they're, they're, really got, got very moist in the mouth. And I said secretions, vaginal

Unknown Speaker 35:41
secretions, um,

Joyce 35:44
yeah, tell us about the vaginal secretions.

Aziza Sesay 35:48
Yeah. Do

you mind just really quickly, because you mentioned the lady at the gym. I think camel toe shaming is a thing. There are some people who do have slightly bigger outer labia, and so when they wear their gym wear, obviously, because a lot of the times the leggings are quite tight, sometimes you can see that camel toe effect. So some people get they get shamed about it. They get really shamed about it. And so they get quite insecure. And there are actually some underwears that come with some padding that prevents the camel toe look. So I think that's where some people may come forward and say, oh, you know, because of it's so obvious, I feel insecure. But they feel insecure again, because somebody said something about it. You know what I mean? You don't just automatically feel shame, and again, it's what we're exposed to. You're always seeing the perfect camel toe less leggings and commercials when someone is wearing it, and then, so if you see that you have it, it's like, Oh, my God, there's something wrong with me. And maybe mine is too big and too full, and, you know, but I mean, maybe

yours is big and full, but actually, imagine all the nerve endings there. Sex must be really such a I think it's just that education, education and and that can go a long way for sensitive and we educate people actually, no, this is this is normal. This is your normal. And you don't need to get and also, if you get rid of it, it could lead to consequences, so on and so forth. It's, again, education is so key. But in regards to secretions, as I mentioned, yes, we have multiple glands in the vulval skin. So we have the skin's glands, we have the Bartholin's glands, and they help in releasing producing lubrication during sexual arousal and pleasure, and it just helps to, again, reduce the friction and the irritation and just makes the process more pleasurable and smooth. Also, we have sweat glands in our vulval skin. So if you remember that our vulval skin is skin, so it's like the skin and the rest of our body, we have sweat glands. We also have what's called sebaceous glands. So the sweat glands help to regulate the temperature, and again, it makes the secretions of an acidic pH. So we want the pH to be acidic so it matches the pH of the vagina, and that atmosphere is the best for our good bacteria, so that we prevent infections from happening or the overgrowth of the bad organisms, which I'm sure we can talk about at some point. So that's what the sweat glands do. And then the sebaceous glands help with the oil, the moisture and the lubrication. And I wanted to very quickly talk about the link to this with estrogen, because I feel like so many people sleep on estrogen, and often it's just seen as you know, it's just there as part of the menstrual cycle, and it's just there for a productive function. Yes, absolutely, it's there for a productive function. But actually it helps in so many ways. And in regards to the vulval skin, we have loads of estrogen receptors, right? So when we say estrogen receptors, these are the ones that respond to the effects of estrogen all around the vulval skin. So we have it on the outer labia, the inner labia, we have it on the vestibule. We have it near the urethral opening. We have it in and around the vagina. It's incredible, because what the estrogen does is, again, it helps to make the skin plump and moisturize. It helps with the production. It enhances, sorry, encourages the production of collagen, which again, helps with the thickness of the skin and and moisture and the plumpness reduce makes it more resilient and prevents tears and cuts and that sort of things in childbirth, even when having sexual intercourse, and it helps to enhance the lubrication, encourages more of the lubrication and that kind of thing. So I just wanted to touch on that, and that's why in different parts of the cycle. So when estrogen is highest, we may notice that our vulva is more plump and richer in comparison to sort of the beginning of the cycle when the levels of our estrogen drops. And so it might be a little bit more shrivel and also that. Why, as we get older, you get the opposite effect. So we're not getting the estrogen as much, and so the skin gets more thin and then more friable and less resilient. But that's where topical vaginal estrogen is amazing. So we often say topical vaginal estrogen, but you can rub it all over. I mean, the estrogen receptor is all around there, and that's something that I like, sort of recently started encouraging my patients to do, because it can make a difference in rubbing it to all the areas that have the estrogen receptors, so that it can have the effect that positive effect that we want to

Joyce 40:33

brilliant. Thank you. Now this is, I think this is another myth that we need to debunk so women worry about keeping their vulva clean and healthy, and we, we've, we hear things, you know, steaming and all sorts of lotions and potions to make your vulva

vagina smell nice, and all this sorts of things. So what should women do about keeping their vulva and vagina clean and healthy?

Aziza Sesay 41:03

Yeah, excellent question, a very common question. So we're going to separate it into the two. If I'm going to talk about the vagina, I don't have anything to say except leave it alone. Yeah, leave your vagina alone. Your vagina is self cleaning. You don't need any hocus pocus potions, lotions, motions, nothing. Don't put anything in it, please. So the vagina has its own balanced environment, its own pH to keep the bugs away. It cleans itself and it does its own job, and the only thing that we need to do is leave it to do the best job that it could do, please. So don't do anything in regards to cleanliness of the vagina, but you can clean your vulva. Okay? And I don't mean that's using douching or forcing a lot of water in the area. You can use lukewarm water to clean the external area if you want some people get a little bit sensitive because they're like, no soap, no soap. You don't need soap. That's a fact. You don't need to put soap around the area. And actually, if you use soap that can lead to more irritation infection, it can affect the balance in the area. Because, remember, I said that the sweat glands, the lubrication that comes out in the moisture in that area is of an acidic pH, and the moment we use soap, which is alkaline, it will mess up that balance, which can then have an effect on the vagina. So you don't need soap, but if you do absolutely want to, you can use mild, un fragrance, very, very mild, on fragrant soap, or you can use a soap substitute, like the mullions and those sort of things. Just be very, very careful what you apply again. This is on the outside. Don't not put anything on the inside. Please, please, please. Don't need any of those shampoos or any of those feminine hygiene products. I don't want to name names, but you know what I'm talking about. You don't need those. Just leave them alone and leave your vulva with the water. But what you can do make sure that you clean it at least once a day, okay, at least, at minimum once a day with water. And then make sure that when you are sort of cleaning the area that you packed, don't scrub, don't rub, and when you're drying the area again you packed, don't scrub, don't rub gently. You want to be very gentle when you're panning. Make sure that you are drinking plenty of water. And this just helps with just your overall skin health, right? Because obviously, if we want to have nice, soft skin, we need to make sure we're drinking enough, we're we're eating healthily. All this balanced diet can make a difference. Also, we want to prevent the overgrowth of yeast, so avoid having too many sweet things. You want to keep the area dry, right? So avoid sitting on wet underwear or undergarments or swimwear. So for instance, if you go swimming, as soon as you get home, take it off. Do not sit with it, because you make the area moist, which is the perfect environment for fungus to grow all these other bugs that we don't want to overgrow. You want to make sure that you're changing your underwear regularly, again, if it's wet, so if you have a lot of discharge coming out, you want to change it frequently. Oh, here's a fun fact, if you notice that your underwear is constantly getting bleached because of your discharge, that's nothing to worry about. It's just because, as I mentioned, that the discharge is acidic, and so acidic, acidity will bleach the underwear. What else is there? Yeah. I mean, those are the main things that I would say in terms of keeping your Volvo clean. Oh, yeah, you want to wipe from front to back. So if you use the bathroom, always wipe from front to back, because if you wipe from back to front, there's a risk that you can get the bugs and your poo around your vulval vaginal area, your vaginal orifice, the opening

of vagina, in the urethra, you can increase the risk of, again, yeast infections or bacterial vaginal. These are all things that happen because you mess up with the the balance of the vagina, but you can also get urinary tract infections. So those are like some basic things that we can all try and do. Try not to wear tight fitting clothing in that area you want to make it breathable. Try to wear more cotton or bamboo based underwear as well. All these synthetic lace and pretty underwears. They're great because they look pretty, but they they may cause recurring infections. So just be careful with that. You want breathable, breathable.

Joyce 45:34

In today's society, everyone's everyone's trying to sell something to women for for their I don't know. We've been sold so many things, and being sold things that are going to, they say they're going to help our female hygiene on that area is, honestly, as you said, it's crazy. I you know, even I think there was, wasn't one of the Cardassians advertising some gummy that supposed to have made your vulva smell like flowers or

Aziza Sesay 46:01

something. Yeah, supposed to make it smell and taste taste good. So there were some supplements that they said it would help to make it smell and taste good. And again, if you have insecurities, oh, by the way, your your vulva and vagina is supposed to have a little bit of that musty smell. I mean, it's not ever gonna We're not flowers, we're not berries, we're not flowers, we are human beings. So there will be a slight odor. I mean, obviously, if it smells really foul and it's fishy and that kind of thing, that may mean you have an infection. So rather than buying those products, please go and see a doctor. So yeah, we could just make sure that that's not the case, you know, but absolutely there's, there are loads of products out there that unfortunately exploit the insecurities that women have, unfortunately because of patriarchy, society and all of that jazz. But I feel like, again, education is empowerment, and hopefully it means that not as many people will fall prey. But a lot of it is to do with desperation, and people prey on the desperation. Unfortunately,

Joyce 47:07

yeah, I can't use any soap. When I was a teenager, I was aware I can't use any soap on my vulva to clean my vulva, and I just wanted to I have said this before, sorry to my sons, who sometimes listen to my podcast. But I have pubic care, and I love my pubic hair. It's, it's, yeah. Anyway, you meant you have mentioned some infections before we move on to the vagina. Anything else about the vulva with regards to infections or irritations that we women should know about?

Aziza Sesay 47:38

Yeah. I mean, the common one that a lot of women will experience at some point in their life is the yeast infection or thrush, and it's just because of the overgrowth of the fungus Candida. And often that happens if we do anything that messes up the balance in that area. So what you'll notice is that you'll have thick sort of cottage cheese discharge. You'll have the most irritating itching in the vulval area, or even within the vagina, can make sex quite uncomfortable as well. And as I say, the things that we've already mentioned, using soaps, having too much sweet in your diet and also not

wearing breathable underwear, all these things that can mess up the balance, can cause stress. Similarly, with bacterial vaginosis, it's the same thing. So we have what's called good bacteria in our vaginal microbiome. Microbiome just means microorganisms or small bugs, basically. So we already have really good ones that help to fend off the bad bacteria. But whenever we do something that messes up with that balance, then the other organisms will take advantage and try and overgrow, and that's what happens in bacterial vaginosis, we have an overgrowth of a bacteria called *Gardnerella*, and that can cause like a fishy, foul smelling, thin, sort of gray discharge, and it may, may not always, cause a bit of irritation in the skin, that can be treated as well. So the sorry, the thrush or the yeast infection can be treated with anti fungals. Bacterial vaginosis can be treated with antibiotic you can either use a gel or they might give you tablets to take. Those are common infections. And then if we think about sexually transmitted infections, so things like chlamydia, gonorrhea, trichomonas, those are sexually transmitted, and this is where, when we're talking about hygiene, actually, I should have mentioned that it's really helpful to use condoms. So use condoms as much as possible. Obviously, if you're in a long term relationship, then technically, it's not necessary, but to help promote your vulval cleanliness, or your vaginal cleanliness, we often say, use condoms, and partly because some women get recurring thrush or bacterial vaginosis because of their partner semen, because semen is alkaline, so sometimes some women experience like really intense itching and irritation, particularly. The vaginal area after they have sex where ejaculation has occurred to the semen. The sperms come out into the area that irritates, that messes up the vaginal balance, which then causes irritation for a few days, and for some they can cause thrush. Just, just a fun fact, in case you're wondering, why did I always get it when I have sex with him? That's why. Yeah, so, so there's that, and then there are loads of different conditions. I just want you to remember that the vulval skin is skin. So you can have a condition called lichen sclerosus, which is a chronic inflammatory condition where you're getting irritation of the skin. And it's called autoimmune because the body basically is attacking itself. So we have immune cells on our vulval skin, which help to usually fend off infections and and like the bad bugs, but sometimes we can, we can start to attack ourselves, and that's what causes the changes that are associated with lichen sclerosus. You can get white patches on the vulval skin, and it can cause cuts and irritation, which is really hard to heal, and some people say that it occurs because of recurring irritation and cuts. We still don't quite understand exactly what happens, but those are some of the thought processes behind it, and unfortunately, there is a small risk that lichen sclerosus can eventually become vulval cancer. And this is why it's so important that you remember that not all itch is yeast infection or thrush, I think because in the UK, anyways, you can get a lot of these anti fungal treatments from over the counter. So you have some individuals that are just perpetually treating what they think is a bubble yeast infection when actually it might be like in sclerosis or even another condition. So I would just say that if you've done a treatment once or even twice, go see your doctor so you can have some assessments done, swabs, all of that to make sure that you're treating the right thing. There's also the genital herpes that can happen, or you can have warts, so many different infections that can happen on the vulval skin. And again, this is why, knowing what your normal is, we've spoken about the secretions, right? Know what your what your sort of discharge is like. Okay, often discharge is either clear, can

be sort of white, can be milky, often it's thin. But remember that in different parts of the cycle, remember, I've told you about how estrogen affects the skin. It will affect the lubrication, will affect the amount of discharge that's coming out. Know what's normal for you across your cycle? And if you notice that it's become copious, if you're having a lot of discharge coming out, or it's become foul smelling, or it's blood stained, or you've noticed that it's become thicker than expected, or exchange colors become yellow or green, that kind of thing always get checked out, because that often can be an indication of infection. So yeah, those are the main things to talk about. I could go on for days.

Joyce 53:01

There's there's a lot to know. The big message for everybody, if, if you think there's anything wrong, please don't self diagnose. Or, you know, these people that have been embarrassed, and then they go on the T that TV program where they, you know, show everyone that they've got this major problem wrong with their their genitals. I just think, why didn't you just go and see your GP? Anyway? Go and see your GP. The shame and

Aziza Sesay 53:27

stigma, the stigma I've had. I had someone who had thrush. She had symptoms of thrust for a year, wow. And she did not get seen by anybody, because she didn't come forward. And then when I saw her, she came about something else, and because she felt comfortable with our consultation, she said, Look, I have been having this problem for a while. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. Can you help me? And I gave her anti fungals. I was like, This is what I think it is, take it and let's see. She came back, not for an appointment. This is years ago, and I don't want anyone to say, oh my god, what a waste of a GP appointment, but she came back just to thank me for something so basic. You know what I mean? It's all the shame and the stigma and the taboo that's associated with that area. And unfortunately, because of that, people don't come forward, and as I say, then they either get they suffer in silence, or they come forward and they get diagnosed late, and it all impacts. It makes an impact on the the outcome. So please don't feel embarrassed. We all have it, I promise you, it's nothing to be embarrassed about.

Joyce 54:31

Well, one of my friends has lichen sclerosus, and she took a long time to get diagnosed because, unfortunately, it was around COVID time, and the GPS she was seen, wouldn't look at her vulva vagina. So in the end, she drew a picture, and then she went in, and then they said, Oh, we better have a look. So, you know, yeah, do what you need to do. But, but please, no women, no woman should suffer in silence with any of these, these issues. So we're going to move on to the lovely vagina. Um, you've talked about the structure. So let's talk about health and pleasure of our vagina. What? What's it? What's it?

Aziza Sesay 55:09

Again, similarly with the vulva in regards in terms of our pleasure zone. So the vagina doesn't have as many nerve endings as the vulva. So our vulva is like crazy pleasure zone, loads of nerve endings. I think the lower third of the vagina has more nerve

endings, but as you move upwards, there's not as many nerve endings in the vagina. But what's really cool about the vagina actually, tomato, it has three different layers. So it has a the mucosal layer, so the inner layer has what's called rugae. I don't know if that's how it's pronounced, but haven't seen it for a while. But essentially that helps with the vaginal stretching. So the vagina is about, I think four, four, yeah, something like that. It's not, it's not that big. It's not as big as people think. So when you then, when people talk about, oh, you know, the penis size needs to be so, no, the vagina isn't actually that big, but it can stretch out to be pretty big. It can stretch out to be pretty big, and that's where the rugae is helpful. And then you have the muscular layer, because the vagina does contract as well, and it helps when the baby's coming out, when we're pushing for the baby to come out. And then it has the outer connective tissue layer as well, the vagina, it does produce a bit of discharge in that the because it has such it has such a good blood supply, and I really want to take a little bit of time just talking about the fact that it has such a good blood supply. That means that anything you're putting in the vagina, you're getting it, getting it absorbed into your body, like all the chemicals and all the, I don't want to say crap, but yeah, basically the crap that that is being advertised as it's important to you, you're absorbing all of these into your internal organs. No, please, cause long term damage. But yeah. Anyways, that that's, that's, by the way, but yeah, it has a really good blood supply, and some of the liquid through the blood vessels is part of the vaginal discharge. We also have discharge from the cervix, so the cervix releases a bit of mucus, which again, helps in terms of the menstrual cycle and the reproductive process, because it thickens into like a plug when it thinks fertilization may have occurred. But then when it's time, when it's ovulation, it sort of becomes this thin egg white type of discharge, which is just the best environment for the sperm to go through and hopefully meet the egg for fertilization. The body is incredible. It does it all by itself. So yeah, so that's what the vaginal discharge is made up of, and also a bit of the lubrication from the outside, so some from the skin's gland and the Bartholin's glands as well. That makes up all the vaginal secretion. But as I say, the vagina is pretty great, because it connects the outside to the internal gynecological organs, so the womb and so on and so forth. And this is where, again, we need to be careful with what we're putting in, because what goes in will go into all these other structures which may not be as resilient as the vulva, as the outside, which is better at keeping all these bugs away,

Joyce 58:22

perfect. So, are there any other conditions, you mentioned, the vulva conditions, and some of them cross over a bit with the vagina. Anything else about infections, irritations, or problems that can happen with specifically the vagina?

Aziza Sesay 58:37

Yeah. I mean, honestly, it would be this similar thrush and BV and all of that. Often, if you have it on the outside, you will have it on the inside, and then STIs and and that sort of thing. But just to quickly touch on HPV human papillomavirus, which is a very common virus, there are hundreds of different strands and strain, sorry. And actually some of them are associated, I think they're about 13 high response which are associated with cancer. So you can also have vaginal cancer, which is rare, but it can happen. So symptoms can include pain during sex, soreness inside the vagina, abnormal, vaginal bleeding, so on and so forth. But the reason I wanted to just quickly

touch on the HPV is because often people associate HPV only with cervical cancer, which, yes, majority of cervical cancer is associated with HPV. But actually you can get HPV that causes vaginal as well as vulval cancer. So just something to think about as well. And like I say, if you put in certain chemicals or soaps or whatnot that can cause irritation in the vaginal skin and leads to infection and so on and so forth.

Joyce 59:58

Yeah, and the Evapo. UCL website has brilliant information about all of these cancers. So if you've got any you want to read anymore, please, please have a look through those. Now we we've talked about, yeah, we've talked about all these beautiful structures that we've got. Do they change through a woman's life? So do they change from puberty, pregnancy, menopause? Does anything change? Yeah, absolutely.

Aziza Sesay 1:00:22

So puberty, that's when we get the injection of all these hormones that cause what we call the secondary sexual characteristics. So absolutely, if we talk about the vulva, for instance, when puberty hits, the estrogen level rises, so it then develops and forms into the mature vulva, which, as I say, is often quite plump, and you know, it's Fuller, and then you start to get all the discharge happening in response to the estrogen. And as I say, through the menstrual cycle, depending on where you are in the cycle and what the levels of the estrogen is, will affect the what the structure of the vulva is like, and also the moisture, the lubrication that's coming out. But for instance, during pregnancy, again, because of the high levels of estrogen that can have an effect and the plumpness of the you might some women notice that their Evolve is so swollen when they're pregnant, and they sometimes get varicose veins, and all of that because, again, of that rich blood supply and just the estrogen, the high level of estrogen, and then when you go down the breast feeding route, which a lot of women don't realize, so when breastfeeding, actually, our estrogen levels drop, so it makes that area feel dry, and we're not getting as much moisture and lubrication. And that can have an impact on sex, it can make sex quite uncomfortable and painful, and also makes us more prone to having infections, and makes us more prone to urinary tract infections, that kind of thing. For some women during breastfeeding, using topical vaginal estrogen can be helpful in those sort of situations, because, again, you're you're treating the cause of their symptoms, but that's short term. Often, when breastfeeding ends, then things go back into place, because you're back onto your usual cycles. For some women as well, for some women who take hormonal contraceptives, if it has an impact on their overall estrogen level, that may have an impact, again, on the vulva, vaginal skin and so on. And then, unfortunately, as we get older, through perimenopause and menopause, because of that steady decline in estrogen and just the low level of estrogen thereafter, because it's not just our ovaries that release estrogen. We also have estrogen released slightly by the adrenal glands and also our fat cells. But it's just not enough to give us that the same effect as the estrogen produced by the ovaries, they have the same symptoms that I mentioned earlier, and this, again, is where topical, vaginal estrogen for life is helpful in those sort of situations to prevent the infection. So absolutely, from puberty onwards, there are changes, and it will continue to fluctuate, depending on what's happening to us and where we're at in our cycle, and but what's important to know is that there are treatment options out there. And so if there's something that

feels different for you, and we've mentioned this, see your doctor, have a chat, and there are options. Basically, don't suffer in silence. Absolutely. And lubrications are great as well. There are loads of different lubricants out there. If you're not producing as much and you don't want to go down a hormonal treatment, you can get lubricants and but I would just be very, very careful in what lubricants you're getting. Don't get the flavored ones, because a lot of people, I have seen, so many people come to me saying that they've gotten thrush or BV from using flavored lubricants. So just avoid those. You want to use water based or silicon based lubricants, and be careful, because some have, is it glycerol, or just look at the contents of it and see whether or not you react, because that's the other thing you can get allergic dermatitis, which is where your body responds to whatever you've exposed it to in a negative way. And it's your body was a way of saying, do not put this anywhere near me ever again. So just be careful and look at the ingredients of whatever you're putting into you. Some people can be allergic to latex, so avoid latex condoms. There are non latex condoms out there. So because I this happened recently where a patient came and said, Oh, I we stopped using condoms because she's allergic to latex. But they didn't know that there was not non latex condoms, and unfortunately, they picked up gonorrhea. So there is non latex condoms available.

Wow. Just educating.

Joyce 1:04:46

Talking about education. So you and I and many others are trying to educate people about this. So I'm sure people have learned something from from what you said today. Don't, don't. Why Can't We? I. Say all of this in schools. Why can't we educate everyone about what we've talked about today? Why can't we do it? We don't, but we should.

Aziza Sesay 1:05:10

I know. I know. And you know what? This is, why I'm so passionate. And as well as you and all of us, we want to change the narrative, and I think the first best step is having these conversations, having these matter of fact conversations where we are normalizing it and we are trying our best to remove the stigma and the shame and the taboo and honestly education, I feel goes a long way, and usually what I have found, just having the conversations, is people then realize, oh, actually, I cannot explain why. As simple as the word vulva isn't cute. And I said, But why? Where did that come from? And as we delve deeper, it's like, you can't explain it. It's just what you've been taught. There is no logic to it at all. So again, just, I think having these conversations and being part of policy making. So obviously, through this, we do a lot of advocacy, and then we do right? We go to Parliament and we have these conversation because I don't think people put two and two together, and the impact and our expertise is absolutely important and relevant. So being in those rooms where we can change policies, where we can implement this in schools, and I am so so so passionate about educating the parents with their children, because I've seen it. I've done it before, where I've educated parents and their children, and you can see the Enlightenment in both of them were like, Oh, I didn't know this, and I didn't know that, and it just brings them closer. And the understanding is they're absolutely still important to educate the children on their own, because they may have questions that they don't want to ask in front of their parents,

but I just think it's so beautiful to educate both at the same time. And we need the education in children, but we need to build it up as well as I say, parents, grandparents, great grandparents, everybody, and it doesn't matter what gender. Often, whenever I do any Women's Health talks, men exclude themselves because they think, Oh, this doesn't pertain to me, so I don't need to listen. But I cannot stress enough the importance of having male allies and having them present in these conversations, in these rooms. And though it's not going to affect you directly, it will affect you indirectly, because you will have a female loved one, be it your mom, your sister, your aunt, your daughter, I cannot stress enough the importance of knowing about this for your daughter, because, for instance, when I got my period, my mom wasn't home, so my dad had the conversation with me, and it was a matter of fact conversation. He tried his best, bless him, but we had the conversation. And that can happen, right? So I can't stress enough the importance of education all around across genders, Across Ages, and I do firmly believe maybe not in my lifetime. I don't know. I'm hoping it will be in my lifetime that it will come a time that the kids will look at us thinking, y'all were embarrassed about this.

That's insane. I'm just keeping my fingers crossed that will that will be the case at some point.

Joyce 1:08:28

I am one of the first blogs I ever wrote about 10 years ago was about educating the parents to talk to their children about sex and reproduction and the body. And it's because my oldest is 22 and I was talking to other parent when he was about 12 or so, talking to other parents of his friends, yeah. And they all said, Oh, we're not going to talk to our children about that, or we're not going to have the talk that there's no the talk. It should all be normalized, you know. So it's just unbelievable. And some work we did on the menstrual cycle with women last year they so many of them said their partner knows nothing about their menstrual cycle or their bodies or anything, because, and I say, look, they were never taught. So it's absolutely crazy that still today, we separate the boys for some of these conversations and the girls, yeah, in there. We want to

Aziza Sesay 1:09:23

say that they should be together, but I understand why they need to be separate. At some point, they should be together to get the education, and then they can be separated, because I'm sure like this. Yeah. I mean, they're young, they get uncomfortable talking about certain things in front of voice, fair enough. But always have them together and in the first place. And you know, to parents who say, I'm not going to have this conversation, or I shouldn't have this talk, I promise you, if you're not having it, some of their friends are going to be teaching them, and they're going to be teaching them the incorrect information in ways that you would never imagine, and you'd be surprised how much younger they're getting in terms of what they're being. Exposed to and what they are seeing as well because of this tiny gadget that can do everything. So we need to be prepared as parents, and if we're not, I promise you like I'm saying my own daughter, her peers are educating her the wrong way, and I am constantly having to do that reassurance that that is inevitable. So yeah, we need to sort of hold the reins, take the reins and definitely take control in terms of trying to

educate as best as we can in the most understanding and the kindest way. And I always talk about spiral learning, so you start off again, tailor it to their understanding, and then you just constantly build complexity as they go along, and let them have that confidence as well. You'd be really amazed by how much these kids understand at such a young age, and how much they are welcome, how much they are very open to hearing about it and learning that doesn't make them hyper sexualized, because that's the other thing. A lot of parents think, oh my god, if I talk about it now, they're gonna want to have sex. No, if you don't talk about it, they're gonna, they're gonna, we need to have the conversation in a healthy way, and again, tailor it to their level of understanding. Yeah,

Joyce 1:11:18

and if they ask the question, I think they're old enough to hear the answer. So sorry. I always said, If my kids ask anything, I'm going to tell them the right answer. So I know some parents, then don't tell them. They think they're too young. And we, like our kids, had sex ed at school about about delivering a baby. And I remember we heard that one of the girls went home and said to her mom, Oh, I hear we were taught the baby comes from my vagina and and is that right? And the mother apparently said, no, no, no, they come from your belly

Aziza Sesay 1:11:52

button. Oh, my God, no, she can't know, but she will know. It's better for her to know it keep the

Joyce 1:11:59

truth. But the last few questions. So I've called this podcast. Why didn't anyone tell me this? So I'm you've had so many conversations. What's the most common thing people didn't know?

Aziza Sesay 1:12:12

Oh, my goodness. Okay. I mean, like the first question that you asked me, vulva versus vagina? Yeah, thinking the vagina is the vulva and that interchangeable thing. There's so many So, like literally everything that we've discussed today, first of all, and I'm glad you mentioned the Eve appeal, of course, I'm an ambassador for the Eve appeal. Just knowing that there are five main gynecological cancers, a lot of people did not know that. Had no idea. A lot of people have no idea about how using soaps or body products or whatnot, and putting them in the vagina that it can cause yeast infections and thrust and that kind of thing a lot of people didn't know about, you know, the three or seven holes that's down there, and they just basic anatomical knowledge. Gynec anatomical knowledge is what I'm really keen on that. And I have so many profs and just basic health information, like, what is normal in terms of periods? So a lot of people don't know that having heavy or painful or both periods is not normal, and they just think it's something that they need to endure, and it's just a plight of being a woman you know, or a lot of people didn't know that painful sex wasn't normal, or that you don't necessarily have to bleed the first time that you have sex. There's so many myths and misconceptions out there that are thriving, you know, even even to this day, and it's just a basic knowledge, a basic education. So a lot of the times, if you see the videos that

I'm making, they're often from conversations I've had, either with my family, friends, sisters, or even patients that I've had where I'm like, they don't know this basic knowledge. Or even, you know, breast lumps are not the only symptom of breast cancer, like it can be skin changes or nipple inversions, if that's something that you've never had, or or bleeding from the nipple, like just these basic, basic things, a lot of a lot of us are not aware of basic knowledge, and unfortunately, that is what's leading to poor outcomes. A lot of people, unfortunately, don't know about the health disparities that exist, particularly within the marginalized communities. Like I often reel off loads of painful stats. Being a black woman, as I mentioned, and a lot of people are not aware that it even exists, it's like, oh no, everyone's the same. No, no, not everyone is the same. Unfortunately, there is, there is institutional, sorry, institutional, institutional, institutional. Why can I not say that word institutional race and systemic racism that exists. A lot of people don't know. And I always say this phrase, a lot of people don't know that they don't know. So this is where education comes to play, and this is where platform like ours are so important. Because if. You don't know what you don't know, then that could be the difference between life and death.

Joyce 1:15:07

Well, thank you, and I'm really it's a pleasure that I'm going to be covering some of these topics that you've mentioned. We're going to do breasts, penis, womb, etc, in these up and coming podcasts, and you have given us so much information, but I always finish by lightening the mood a little bit. So I'm a little bit obsessed with with happiness and just people having a really positive life. So Aziza, what makes you happy and where is your happy place?

Aziza Sesay 1:15:40

What makes me happy, genuinely, is being around my family, like, I am very family oriented, and just, literally, just being around my family, you don't have to be doing anything at all. I mean, I mean for dancing, that's great. I love dancing. I love listening to music and just dancing like a crazy person. I'm one of those people that you see on the streets going bumping a lot like, yeah. So that makes me, that makes me happy. My happy place is, yeah, being surrounded by family. But also, if I'm alone by myself and I'm listening to yes or old school songs and I'm, you know, bopping along and just dancing, that makes me happy. Fantastic,

Joyce 1:16:17

fantastic. And the very last question, what advice would you give your younger self?

Unknown Speaker 1:16:24

Oh, wow.

Aziza Sesay 1:16:28

I guess I would say that the shame, the stigma, the taboo and embarrassment, should not overwhelm you, and there is definitely more to it than you understand. So know your normal and keep educating the masses about what their normal is, so that we can continue to save lives.

Joyce 1:16:53

Beautiful, absolutely beautiful. Well, it's been a total pleasure. It was, I think that's the most overflowing with knowledge podcast I've done so far. Oh, brimming, brimming with amazing education, and I learned something which was which was really fabulous. I'm going to start talking about seven openings now, and not three anymore. I love that. I love that so absolute total pressure always is, because you're just so full of life and energy. I absolutely love it. So thank you so much for giving up your time today, and thank you very much.

Unknown Speaker 1:17:28

Thank you. Applause.

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