

Study finds concerning connection between feminine hygiene products and infection

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Professor Keiran O'Doherty. Credit: University of Guelph

Vaginal hygiene products have been used by 95 per cent of Canadian women, but they likely do more harm than good, according to a University of Guelph study.

The first-ever study revealed that women who use these products are three times more likely to experience some type of [vaginal infection](#). In some cases it may be women purchased the product to address an existing vaginal concern.

"This study establishes a baseline of what Canadian women do with regard to their vaginal [health](#) and identifies concerning correlations that researchers can now look into more closely," said psychology professor Kieran O'Doherty, the study's lead investigator.

Published in the journal *BMC Women's Health*, the study surveyed nearly 1,500 Canadian women about their vaginal health practices and products, and how often they experienced problems.

"While research has shown douching can have negative impacts on vaginal health, little was

known about the dozens of other products out there," said O'Doherty.

The most commonly used products included anti-itch creams, moisturizers and lubricants, and feminine wipes. The results connected certain products with specific infections.

"The study does not establish whether it is the products causing the infections or whether women are using the products in an attempt to address the [infection](#)," said O'Doherty. "However, the results do provide important evidence for strong correlations that need further research."

For example, women who used gel sanitizers were eight times more likely to have a yeast infection and almost 20 times more likely to have a [bacterial infection](#).

Women using feminine washes or gels were almost 3 ½ times more likely to have a bacterial infection and 2 ½ times more likely to report a [urinary tract infection](#).

Participants using feminine wipes were twice as likely to have a urinary tract infection, and those using lubricants or moisturizers were 2 ½ times as likely to have a [yeast infection](#).

O'Doherty said emerging medical research has linked disruption of vaginal microbial systems with health problems.

"These products may be preventing the growth of the healthy bacteria required to fight off infection."

Pelvic inflammatory disease, cervical cancer, reduced fertility, ectopic and pre-term pregnancies, and bacterial and sexually transmitted infections are among the problems related to an abnormal vaginal microbiome, he said.

Vaginal hygiene products are a \$2-billion industry in

North America.

In a previous study published recently, O'Doherty and a team of researchers looked at why Canadian women use these products. They found women are unaware of the potential health concerns linked to these products and believe the items will make them feel clean and fresh.

"Our society has constructed female genitalia as unclean, and the marketing of vaginal hygiene products as something [women](#) need to attain the ideal is contributing to the problem. These products are viewed as a physical need rather than a choice. But the reality is, there are potential health risks to using these products."

More information: Sara E. Crann et al, Vaginal health and hygiene practices and product use in Canada: a national cross-sectional survey, *BMC Women's Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.1186/s12905-018-0543-y](#)

Provided by University of Guelph

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