



What's that smell?

To be taught in parallel with Season 2, Episode 3 of the podcast *This is Probably a Really Weird Question...*

Intended Audience

This educational module is intended for use at an undergraduate level. Students are anticipated to have majors in nursing, pre-medical studies, biological sciences, and other health-related fields.

Therefore, the purpose of this lesson is to help prepare students for a future career in healthcare, with an emphasis on provider-patient relationships and discussing sexuality.

Learning Objectives:

At the end of the lesson students will...

- know how to recognize misinformation shaping the rationales for many genital hygiene products
- be familiar with the history of feminine/genital hygiene trends in the United States
- gain visual and media literacy skills
- learn how to identify advertisements as primary sources for historical and health research

Required Materials

Season 2 / Episode 3 of *This Is Probably a Really Weird Question...* podcast: [“What’s that Smell?”](#)

[Jenkins, Amanda, Deborah Money, and Kieran C. O’Doherty. 2020. “Is the Vaginal Cleansing Product Industry Causing Harm to Women?” *Expert Review of Anti-Infective Therapy* 19 \(3\): 267–69. doi:10.1080/14787210.2020.1822166.](#)

[Guirguis, Marina O., and Jocelyn J. Fitzgerald. "The Troubling Trend of Repackaging Feminine Hygiene Products for the next Generation." *OBG Manag* 34 \(2022\): 28-30.](#)

Anticipated Misconceptions to Address

- **It is not “normal” for the vulva or vagina to have an odor.** This is not true; everyone has a natural odor. While at times certain odors can denote an infection or other ailment, everyone smells.
- **Vaginal cleaning and perfuming are harmless.** Vaginas naturally “clean” themselves. Using perfuming and cleansing products can throw off the body’s natural pH, leading to infections.
- **Only vaginas have an odor.** No, anywhere that humans sweat will have some odor, and there are a multitude of sweat glands around genitals.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

To begin the class, it may be beneficial to briefly review the podcast episode and reading material, in case any students have not completed the assigned readings.

Class Discussion

Next, students will be given an opportunity to discuss with their classmates the content and their opinions of the two reading assignments.

Some questions that can guide discussion:

- Why are people concerned about the odor of their genitals?
- What has led to the misconception that genital and particularly, vaginal odor, should be eliminated?
- What are the types of words and marketing that are being used to sell these products to people with vaginas? Why?

Interactive Activity

There are two versions of this activity

- **Version A:** Intended for one class session

The activity and presentation to the class all takes place during one session

- **Version B:** spread across two class sessions

The activity is begun in the first class session, completed outside of class, and presented or discussed in the following class session.

Students will be given a document of resources (found on the “Teach the Pod” section of the RWQ podcast website) that consist of various advertisements for genital cleansing and perfuming products. In groups of two or three, students are asked to review the resources and construct an advertisement or piece of media to counter the messaging in the resources using the knowledge they have gained from the course’s reading and the podcast episode. Students are asked to get creative and encouraged to use a medium they feel comfortable with: computer graphics, drawing, video, commercial, skit, etc.

In Version A, students will then be asked to briefly present their media to the rest of the class and explain what misconceptions it addresses and why. In Version B, students can continue their work outside of class. They can either upload their media to the class management for peer evaluation prior to the next class session or students can present it to the rest of the class in the next session. An additional option for evaluation is a written component to the instructor that explains which genital smell myth they are countering and how their media addresses and corrects misinformation prior to the next

Additional Resources:

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object-groups/health-hygiene-and-beauty/feminine-hygiene-products>

<https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/news-and-ideas/marketing-menstruation>

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/playtex-fresh-sexy-wipes_n_2626158

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/womens-blog/2014/nov/25/history-feminine-hygiene-products-biohack-vaginas-peaches>

<https://medium.com/cappuccini/a-brief-history-of-feminine-hygiene-products-f7ee9641c46d>

Vostral, Sharra L. *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008.

