

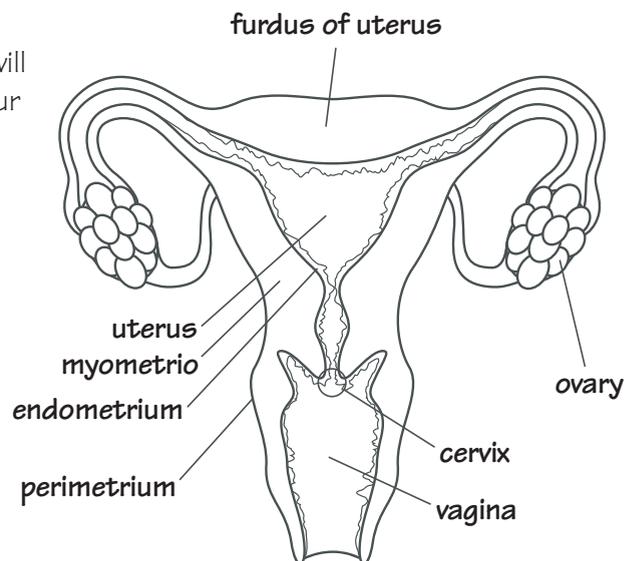
What to Expect when Visiting the Doctor

For Moms

Going to the doctor in the U.S. might make you feel nervous or uncomfortable. This is normal. Cultural norms about healthcare practices and doctor visits vary depending on the region of the world you are from. The two most common doctors women visit in the U.S. are Primary Care Doctors, who assess your overall health, and an OB/GYN (Obstetrician and Gynecologist) who provides medical care specifically to women and specialize in reproductive health, pregnancy, and childbirth. It is recommended that you visit the OB/GYN and Primary Care Doctor once a year for a women's wellness exam.

When you go to an OB/GYN appointment, you will interact with many different people. First, a receptionist will check you in and take down personal information such as your name, birth date, and insurance information. Then a medical assistant or nurse will take your weight, height, blood pressure, and sometimes a blood test or a urine sample. They will also ask you questions about how you have been feeling and any health concerns you may have. They will provide you with a gown and give you time to undress, put the gown on, and sit on an exam bed. The doctor will then come visit you and ask more questions about your health. They might listen to your heart and conduct a physical exam in which they press on your stomach or breasts to see if there is anything abnormal.

The doctor will also ask questions related to your reproductive health, your menstrual cycle, and your sexual activity. This is an opportunity for you to ask them questions about getting pregnant or any health issues related to FGC.



FEMALE
Reproductive System



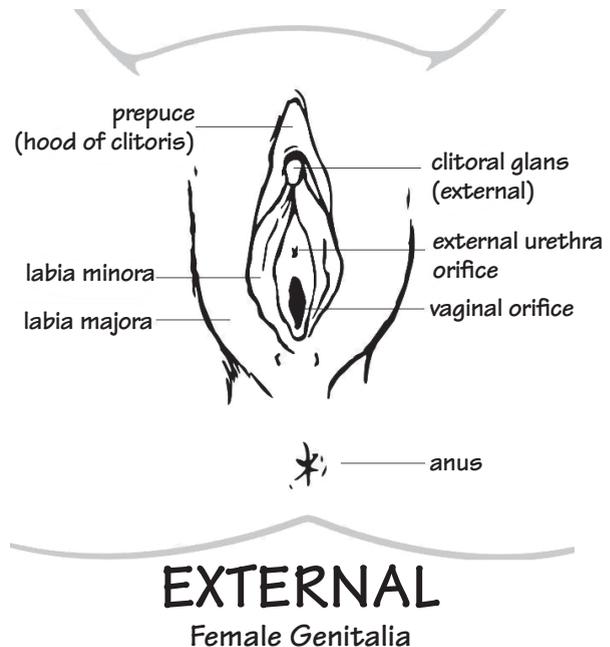
Doctors perform a pelvic exam and a pap smear about once a year to examine the health of your reproductive body parts. These exams are optional, but recommended. If you have undergone FGC these exams may be impossible or more difficult to perform. It's important to inform the doctor prior to the exam if you have been circumcised.

Pelvic Exam:

During a pelvic exam, an OB/GYN will use their fingers to press on the outside of your body, checking your uterus, cervix, fallopian tubes, ovaries, and bladder for any abnormalities or signs of illness. First the doctor will examine the opening of your vagina, looking for cysts, irritation, or abnormal discharge. Then the doctor will insert a speculum into your vagina and examine your internal reproductive organs. Usually, this exam takes only a few minutes and does not hurt, though can feel rather uncomfortable. It is recommended you have this exam done annually during your reproductive years.

Pap Smear:

A pap smear is usually done during the pelvic exam where the doctor obtains a small sample of cells from the cervix to test for cervical cancer, a cancer that only occurs in women. Sometimes the pap smear is slightly painful, though it only lasts a few seconds. For women ages 21-29 it is recommended you have a pap smear every year. For women ages 30 and older pap smears are only needed every other year unless there are abnormalities or signs of illness related to your female body parts. Some cultures believe a pap smear can tear your hymen, usually an indication that a woman has lost her virginity. However, there is no evidence a pap smear tears or stretches your hymen in any way.



If you have been circumcised, going to the doctor could be emotional. Consider talking with someone (a friend, a relative, a religious leader, or a counselor) about what you are feeling before or after your appointment. You may also feel uncomfortable because of a fear of being stigmatized. Remember, FGC is not your fault and it is against the law in the U.S. for doctors (or anyone) to discriminate against you because of FGC.

Your Daughter's Visit to the Doctor

Usually, your daughter won't have her first pelvic exam and pap smear until she is over the age of 18. However, her Primary Care Doctor or Pediatrician may do a gynecological exam after her first menstrual cycle. Your daughter should visit a Primary Care Doctor annually to make sure she continues to grow and develop in a healthy way, to check for any signs of illness, or to receive updated immunizations as needed. When she goes to the doctor, you should be in the room with her to provide comfort or ask any questions during the exam. They will check your daughter's weight, height, vision, hearing, blood pressure, lungs, and body mass. They will also ask questions about her sleeping and eating habits or signs of puberty.



If it has been more than a year since your daughter went to the doctor, schedule an appointment. Having an annual checkup is not only important for her health, but it is usually required for school registration.





Moms, think about it...

- * Do you and your daughter visit the doctor at least once a year?
- * If you've experienced FGC, have you informed your doctor? This can help the doctor prepare prior to the exam so they know how to provide you with the best care. Have you considered requesting an interpreter to help discuss sensitive topics like these?
- * Bring the BRYCS resource, *Starting a Conversation with your Doctor* (see page 65) to your appointment. This resource provides an explanation of FGC to physicians as well as information on your experience and health concerns.



For Daughters

Girls usually go to the doctor every year for an annual check-up, sometimes called a 'wellness exam.' This is so a doctor can check on your health and make sure you are growing and developing in a healthy way. When you are at the doctor, they will check your weight, height, vision, hearing, blood pressure, lungs, and body mass. They will also ask questions about your sleeping and eating habits and check for signs of puberty. If you are growing breasts, developing pubic hair, or have your menstrual cycle, the doctor may ask you questions about these changes. It might feel uncomfortable for a doctor to ask you these questions or to touch parts of your body during an exam, but it's an important exam for your health. Be sure your mom or another trusted adult is in the room with you during your exam. If you have any questions for the doctor, don't hesitate to ask! They are used to getting all sorts of questions.

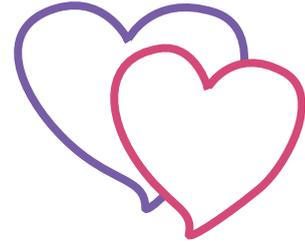
In some cultural communities, FGC is kept very private along with other topics about puberty, therefore talking about such things with your doctor can be intimidating. Nevertheless, it is important to let your doctor know if you have undergone FGC or if you have any symptoms or pain related to it. FGC is illegal and uncommon in the U.S. so letting your doctor know ahead of time can help them better treat you.

Talking to your doctor about your experience with FGC could also bring up a lot of emotion. You might feel embarrassed, confused, sad, or angry that you are circumcised. If you feel this way, it's important to talk to a trusted adult about your feelings. This could be your mom, a relative, a teacher at school, or a religious leader.

Girls visit a doctor once a year for a wellness exam. Changes related to puberty do not necessitate going to the doctor outside of your routine check-up. However, if you are experiencing pain or discomfort that is out of the ordinary or related to FGC, let your mom or caregiver know. It may be important for you to schedule a doctor's appointment.



Heart to Heart



Ask your Daughter

- ◆ Are there any questions you might want to ask the doctor at your next appointment?
- ◆ Are there any questions you feel embarrassed to ask the doctor? Sometimes it may feel awkward asking questions about your body, but doctors are used to all sorts of questions and they are here to help us.

Ask your Mom

- ◆ Is there anything in our family medical history I should be aware of?
- ◆ Do you have any suggestions for questions I should ask the doctor?
- ◆ Are there differences in going to the doctor in the U.S. from going to the doctor in our country?



Tell me a story

Take time to share stories about yourself with each other. Choose from this list or ask about something else you are curious about!

Something
funny that
happened
to you

Your
favorite
day

A
time when
you were
scared

Your
biggest
accomplishment

Your
craziest
dream

Something
you remember
about being
my age