

Genitalia (Female External)

Encyclopedia Article

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Genitalia (Female External)

The visible external genital **organs** of a female are collectively termed the vulva. The vulva extends from the mons pubis, the soft fatty **tissue** below the **abdomen** that is covered with public **hair**, and which lays on top of the pubic bone, to the perineum, the area between the vagina and the anus. The external genitalia consist of the clitoris, the clitoral hood, the labia majora, and the labia minora.

Labia majora is from the Latin for "large lips." They are the large, outer lips of the vulva, which extend from the mons pubis down either side of the vulva. Typically, they are covered by pubic hair and are soft in appearance because of the presence of fatty tissue under the skin. Labia minor means "small lips" in Latin. Smaller and fleshier in appearance than the labia major, they are located inside the labia major, closer to the vaginal opening. The labia minor exhibit great variation in size, color, and shape in females. The labia major and minor develop between nine and twelve weeks after conception.

Another external feature of female genitalia is the clitoris. It is a firm and rounded organ found at the top of the vulva, just above the urethra (the opening that connects to the bladder and from which urine is expelled). The clitoris is small--only about 0.25 in. (0.64 cm) long--yet it is central to female sexual responsiveness. An embryological analog of the male penis, the clitoris composed of erectile tissue and **blood** vessels. The sole function of the clitoris is sexual stimulation. The female orgasm is produced by stimulation of the clitoris. In the fetus, the clitoris begins to develop by nine weeks after conception, and its development is complete by eleven weeks.

The final external feature of female genitalia is the vagina. The vagina is a canal of muscle, from 3-6 in. long, that leads from the external vaginal opening (which is also called the introitus). It is the vagina that accommodates the male penis during intercourse. **Sperm** deposited in the vagina during intercourse, passes up the vaginal canal to begin the process of conception.

The female genitalia develops in the embryo between seven and twelve weeks following conception, in response to the presence of a hormone called **estrogen**. Development is essentially complete at twelve weeks following conception. Until then the male and female genitalia are not distinct from each other.