The Vaginal Microbiome Explained: Hormones, Fertility, and Immunity Transcript

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Introduction to the Female Microbiome

So the Lactobacillus is the species that dominates the vaginal microbiome. Are there any signs or symptoms that someone might experience that prompts them, I might be out of balance?

Well, I want to step back quickly because you bring up a good point. Lactobacillus is just the first name of a species. But there's a full name that we want to pay attention to when we're talking about Lactobacillus because it turns out there's many different types of Lactobacillus, but more specifically it's Lactobacillus crispatus, Lactobacillus gasseri, Lactobacillus gensinii that drive the pH lowest and have the most ability to help support the environment.

So it's really unique to the types of lactobacillus, the exact species name that is really key and important. Your health is shaped by more than symptoms.

Through real stories and expert insights, we explore how your genetics, environment, and daily choices affect your wellbeing. We uncover root causes and share practical tools to help you find the healing you need.

Welcome to the Forum Health Integrative Medicine podcast. Welcome back to the Forum Health Integrative Medicine podcast. I'm your host, health coach, and wellness aficionado, Amanda.

Today we're talking about something that affects every woman, yet is rarely explained in a clear or empowering way, the female microbiome. Specifically, how the vaginal microbiome plays a role in things like hormones, fertility, immunity, and overall well-being, and why so many women experience symptoms without ever getting real answers.

I'm joined today by Maureen Pickle, a nationally recognized clinician and educator who bridges conventional medicine with functional and integrative care.

Maureen is a certified physician assistant with over 20 years of experience in clinical nutrition and functional medicine, and she holds a doctorate of medical science as well as a master of public health from the University of Michigan.

She currently serves as a clinical science liaison for microbiome labs and novenessence, where she helps translate emerging microbiome science into practical, real-world applications for both clinicians and patients.

This is a judgment-free, science-backed conversation meant to help women better understand their bodies, not feel like something is wrong with them. So whether you've struggled with reoccurring infections, hormone shifts, or you're just curious about how better to support your health, this episode's for you.

Welcome, Maureen. Thank you so much for joining us today. Excited to have you. So this episode isn't about what's wrong with you.

What the Vaginal Microbiome Does

It's about what your body is doing and how it's working. And today we're going to be talking about the female microbiome. Absolutely. So when we hear the term female microbiome, you know, we really think about women as whole beings, right, from head to toe.

And oftentimes our conversations around the microbiome have historically focused mostly on our gut microbiome.

And so although the gut microbiome is extremely important, and we'll talk more about that today, we forget that we have microbiomes throughout our entire anatomy, our entire body.

And so it's been really fascinating to follow the research and the data as scientists have learned more specifically about microbiomes and other parts of our body, and specifically our vaginal tissue, our urinary tract, and our uterine microbiome.

Awesome. So the female microbiome is the vaginal microbiome. We've got the gut microbiome, which is our digestion, inflammation, all that stuff. We, as women, also have the vaginal microbiome.

And as well, there's the urinary and the vulvar microbiome as well, which are often overlooked, but are also closely connected. And it's interesting because all of these systems communicate.

We're going to learn some really interesting stuff today about the vaginal microbiome. So what does the vaginal microbiome do and what does that really consist of?

Yeah. So when we use the term microbiome, what we're really talking about is a community of microorganisms that exists in an anatomical space of the body.

And so when we're talking about the community of organisms and microbes that exist in the vagina, for example, we're talking about the microorganisms that are present that help protect us and the microorganisms that are sometimes transient and cause disturbances in our wellbeing.

Okay, perfect. So it's really the area down there. It's the vagina, everything that goes on down there. Is there an area that it stops or that environment stops?

So when we're talking about the microbiome, we know that the microorganisms can move from one area to another, that anatomical, those organs are really close to each other.

So we don't have that much space that separates the uterine tract from the vagina and even the anus, the exit of the digestive tract. It's the anatomical divisions specifically that divide where we should have an abundance of one type of organism or another.

Organisms, we know the gut microbiome is a really diverse environment. There's thousands of different types of bacteria living in our gut microbiome, which might be different from our vaginal microbiome.

So what does a healthy vaginal microbiome look like? And is it the same for every woman? That's a great question, and this is an evolving answer for sure.

What we know about the gut microbiome, as you stated, is that we have so many important jobs that our digestive tract is responsible for, and so we have a species that has many different functions.

You know, we may have 250 species in the gut and each of them have a different job. Some help us break down vitamins, some help us digest our bile acids, others help keep our immune system supported.

Whereas in the vagina, the purpose of those species is more specific. It's really to help prevent an overgrowth of unwanted organisms or unwanted pathogens in the vagina.

Lactobacillus and Healthy pH Balance

And so unlike the gut microbiome, what we have found consistent so far in the data is that a dominance of certain microorganisms can be more protective and having benefits to decrease the role that pathogens can have when we are introduced to unwanted types of microbes.

Okay. So in the vaginal microbiome, there is less diversity of species. So there's less different types of bacteria that

make up our vaginal microbiome.

And That's due to the fact that the vaginal microbiome doesn't have as many functions as our gut microbiome might have. Our gut microbiome is digesting our food, helping us absorb our micronutrients.

It's helping play a role in creating nutrients and different neurotransmitters, all of these different functions where the vaginal microbiome less diverse, but its main bacteria that are living in the vagina are there as a protection.

Their main job is protection. Ladies, your vaginal microbiome is just as important as your gut. That's why microbiomes teamed up with Inwell Biosciences to create the Flora Balance, a clinically-backed 4-in-1 formula designed to support vaginal urinary, digestive, and immune health.

With five lactobacillus strains naturally found in healthy vaginas and 500 milligrams of cranberry powder, V-flora balance helps maintain optimal pH, support healthy yeast and bacterial populations, promoting lasting comfort and confidence.

Feel balanced, feel supported, feel like you. Learn more and order at shopformhealth.com. Absolutely, that's exactly what we found. Okay, and so what are some of the ways that these microbes are creating that protective environment?

Yeah, so this has been revealed to us as we've studied cohorts or groups of women over time and we started to recognize certain patterns and to be able to see how some women are more vulnerable to infections where some women may get repeat infections and some women may have more resilience or resistance when they're exposed to a pathogen.

And so that's really what started this ongoing research and helping us try to understand which microorganisms can be more protective. What we understand is that a lot of this has to do with how these microbes help preserve particular pH, an environment that's more acidic versus more alkaline.

And it's that pH balance that really helps determine which bacteria can thrive, whereas which bacteria don't thrive as well in that environment. And we're looking to maintain a more acidic pH environment within that microbiome.

Exactly. And this has some variability. We know that there's normative data that varies depending on a woman's age or even depending on a woman's you know, genetic history or even external factors that we're still trying to understand in future data that's being collected.

But our basic understanding is that, yeah, vaginal pH that's somewhere between, you know, 3.5 or 4 and 4.5 is probably ideal for preventing the overgrowth of unwanted pathogens.

Okay, great. And what is the, we were talking about the different types of microbes, what is the dominated or the species that dominates the vaginal microbiome?

Yeah, this is a great question. So what we have learned from the data around the cohorts that I mentioned, which really didn't get exposed until around 2011. So after many people did their clinical training, maybe even your own healthcare provider, this information might be new because it's still evolving, is that there are certain species of the lactobacillus group that are able to drive the pH lower than other types of lactobacillus, whereas other very common types of microbes that we may commonly see in the gut microbe and microbiome and may be really healthy in the digestive tract don't serve the same utility in driving the pH as low.

And part of that can be because Our lactobacillus species have the ability to produce lactic acid, which is what's helping to drive that pH low. Got it.

So the lactobacillus is the species that dominates the vaginal microbiome. Are there any signs or symptoms that someone might experience that prompts them, I might be out of balance?

Well, I want to step back quickly because you bring up a good point. Lactobacillus is just the first name of a species, but there's a full name that we want to pay attention to when we're talking about Lactobacillus.

Signs of Vaginal Dysbiosis

Because it turns out there's many different types of Lactobacillus, but more specifically, it's Lactobacillus crispatus, Lactobacillus gasseri, Lactobacillus gensinii that drive the pH lowest and have the most ability to help support the environment.

So it's really unique to the types of Lactobacillus, the exact species name that is really key and important. So Lactobacillus is the genus and then the second is the diversity in the species of the genus Lactobacillus.

You got it. Perfect, perfect. So, and I've seen this on a lot of different blends too of different probiotics that I've researched out there is that there's usually several types of the genus with multiple different species that allows different things to happen.

Yep, each have a different role. Awesome. If a woman were to experience any signs or symptoms to give them a clue that their vaginal microbiome might be out of balance, what would some of those things be?

What would women experience that would give them a clue to say, hey, I might have some vaginal dysbiosis going on? Yeah, this is important. So some of them are really common that you can sort of imagine, right?

If you're experiencing frequent urinary tract infections, that may suggest that there's a microbiome shift in the urinary tract or even in the vagina that's affecting the urinary tract microbiome that you should be paying attention.

People that have recurrent Candida yeast infections, which might present like a vaginal itchiness, vaginal discharge, Perhaps pain during intercourse, all of those could be signs in addition to a rash or a change in the skin color.

Additionally, we see symptoms like an odor. A little bit of vaginal discharge is completely normal for women, but if that discharge becomes malodorous or has an unwanted fishy odor, that can be a signal of a bacterial infection that can be associated with a shift in the microbiome.

So a lot of these things, the UTIs, candida, yeast, reoccurring infections, all of those happen because you have a bacteria that has taken over, which is the purpose of our vaginal microbiome is to create a protection for the vaginal microbiome to prevent that overgrowth.

So when there's all of these reoccurring infections, yeast, UTIs, the odor, irritations, dryness, things like that, that's your body's signal that you might need some support and there's some dysbiosis going on.

Yeah, those are the first signals that we looked for. But it turns out that there's some far more complex conditions that can also be signals for something that may be off with the vaginal microbiome that we should be paying attention to as well.

And some of these conditions have really shown really impressive data that we're still learning more about how can help support you know, people that have these conditions because they can be quite serious.

So, for example, people that have had a history of preterm birth during recent deliveries of their children, patients that have had a history of infertility or trouble conceiving, if a patient's had multiple in vitro transfers where they're trying to get pregnant and they're having trouble with the implantation.

All of those are also signals that we should be considering the role of the microbiome as well. so many things that this could play a role in. Infertility, also we're talking about the immune system, right?

If you're getting reoccurring infections and things like that, this is having an impact on your immune system

because the bacteria isn't able to prevent that infection, but also now it has to trigger your immune system.

How strong is your immune system? So it's not just that you're getting these reoccurring infections, but you can also be doing damage to the, your fertility.

So as we look at the, the vaginal microbiome, it's, does that go up into like the uterus and is that where some of this bacteria is also, it's not just the outside of your vagina where you would think like wipe front to back, right?

Um, things like that, but this does go all the way up into your uterus and, and those organs as well, right? Yeah, we have a bacterial community that exists within the uterine cavity, which we generally think of as being a more sterile environment and that there's not a direct entry point that is easily accessible through the cervix.

But it does have an entry point in which bacteria can enter the cervix and get into the uterine cavity, which is why it's relevant to fertility. Yeah, absolutely.

Absolutely. So there's the obvious signs that you're getting UTIs. Maybe you have an odor or dryness, irritation, things like that. But then there's the maybe not so obvious signs where this could be affecting fertility, and immune system responses to those infections.

What Disrupts the Vaginal Microbiome

And then also there's, you know, everyday things that could quietly disrupt your vaginal microbiome. So you might have this, but what are some of the things that can cause some of the dysbiosis that we experience or could be experiencing?

Yeah. So there's some things that may be completely out of our control, like our age and our hormonal changes, even you know, medications that we need to be taking for other reasons.

But there's many things that are quite simple that could be modifiable or something that we can have more control over, such as the clothing we wear, the products that we use during our menstrual cycle.

We know that there's been data collected from the University of Antwerp that has helped us understand how some of these factors like our clothing, the yoga pants that we wear when we're exercising, the material, whether it's a synthetic material or breathable cotton fabric.

that slight change in your clothing choices can make a real difference in the risk and susceptibility to the shift in your microbiome. That's interesting.

I don't know what I was reading. Oh, my sister-in-law just gave birth to our second nephew in our family, and she had on her baby registry was requesting cotton, 100% organic cotton fabrics and stuff like that.

So I started to look into different fabrics and things like that, polyester and some of the frequencies and the energy that these, the products give off.

I can't, I wouldn't quote me on this, but I think polyester gives off the same frequency as a cadaver. Yeah. And so some of these don't have like the best frequencies and things like that.

So it's not hard to imagine that this can also play a role in our environment as well. And what the data scientists have even found is that we think that by doing our laundry and washing our clothing that we're completely eradicating any bacteria that we've been exposed to throughout the day, but we find that there's remnants of those microbes that can retain in those synthetic fabrics and are harder to eradicate than they do from the cotton fabrics.

Interesting. That being said too, even the detergents or things that you use to wash your clothes could be hormone disruptors and those can also disrupt the microbiome also.

So the type of clothing that you're wearing, whether that clothing is able to get rid of those daily microbes that collect on it. But in addition to that, what you're using to clean the clothes and stuff like that can also have an impact on the microbiome as well.

At Forum Health, we uncover the why behind your symptoms. With advanced lab testing, hormone optimization, and cutting-edge therapies, we help you heal and perform your best.

And now, through shopforumhealth.com, you can access physician-grade supplements trusted by our providers, supporting everything from adrenal health to focus and longevity.

Learn more at ForumHealth.com and explore supplements at ShopForumHealth.com. You know, people think that they're doing themselves a service by using a fragranted soap or body wash, but women really need to take into consideration how things that get inserted, everything from a lubricant to a wash may actually be more disruptive to the vaginal microbiome than it may be useful.

Yeah. When I used to do more research or when I first got started in this industry, I did a lot of research on detoxification and the gut and things like that.

The tampons that we use, you know, can be associated with more bacterial overgrowth than using like a dibby cup or a menstrual cup to collect the blood.

And so that's a really common one that women have. on tampons like bleached or unbleached and things like that. Like, I don't want to put a tampon in my body that has been bleached.

And that sounds awful because also that area of your body absorbs so much. It's so porous that it can absorb all of these things. Also, it's kind of like our gut lining that absorbs nutrients and things like that.

sensitive part that can absorb quickly as well. The other things like you said, medications that you might not be able to avoid, but even antibiotics, even though you're taking them orally, they're still going to have an impact.

I think a lot of people understand that antibiotics kill gut bacteria, whether it's good or bad, which is why you should always follow an antibiotic with an appropriate strong-dosed probiotic to help reestablish your gut microbiome, but also your vaginal microbiome as well can be impacted by antibiotics, even if it's not for or vaginal infections, hormonal birth control.

And you had mentioned too, like age. So we'll get into this in a second too, which I think is absolutely fascinating, but hormonal shifts. I didn't connect the dots, but hormonal shifts, whether you're pregnancy or postpartum, whether you're transitioning into perimetapause or metapause, all of those things can have an impact on not only your gut microbiome, but your vaginal microbiome as well.

Things like chronic stress, if those things are impacting your hormones, they're going to also impact your microbiome as well. So yeah. And also our partners, right?

So any type that's inserted, you know, semen has a very different pH than the normal vaginal environment. And so our partners play a big role in that as well.

Absolutely. So I want to circle back because I find this part of the topic fascinating also, but aging, hormones, and the vaginal microbiome. How does the microbiome change during those major life phases, like aging, postpartum, perimenopause?

What's going on there? Yeah, so what we understand is that estrogen, which is a really important hormone in particular to women, can shift and we expect it to shift as we get older.

And more specifically, we see estrogen declining as we age. And it's a steady decline. So we see that declining, you know, from the time we hit puberty, all the way until the end of our life, really.

And so what we find is that, you know, that 10-year period before menopause where we have a really major shift in our estrogen levels, we are seeing women with declining levels of estrogen, you know, at varying times of the day that might look different depending on how they were checking their levels.

But regardless of what an individual level is, the estrogen of a 50 year old is going to look different than the estrogen levels of a 20 year old. And when we have less estrogen, We feed less glycogen in many areas of the body.

Hormones, Aging, and Microbiome Shifts

As it relates to today's conversation, we're talking about how estrogen, as it decreases, we have less estrogen-feeding glycogen. And when we have less glycogen in the vaginal space, we have less lactobacillus present.

So the glycogen, just for our listeners out there, is fuel for our good bacteria. So as estrogen declines, estrogen feeds glycogen, glycogen feeds the good bacteria in our intermicrobiomes.

Exactly. So when we have less good bacteria, which is causing a protective environment, our pH, which we want more on the acidic side, starts to rise.

And so that's where we might start seeing some of the. symptoms with vaginal dysbiosis, the dryness, the irritation, the infections. The increased vulnerability.

Yeah. Yeah, so it's really something to pay particular close attention to for women as they start to enter their perimenopausal years. Absolutely. So is there a test to assess your vaginal microbiome health?

Is it necessary to test? So there may be some times where you may not have a particular concern with what your microbiome looks like in the vaginal space, but for patients that have been struggling with recurrent symptoms or particularly patients that know they may be more vulnerable to one reason or another, where having that insight could really help change the quality of their life.

Having that information can really direct intervention and think about how they could take action in a way that would support them. Okay. And so we do know there's a couple of tests that patients can do from the comfort of their home that are really quite simple to administer.

Patients can obtain a diagnostic test where they can just insert a little wand to collect a sample of the vaginal mucosa and mail it off to a diagnostic lab to get information about what microbes are present.

Perfect. So when somebody receives information or they're noticing signs and symptoms and they have this inkling that, hey, I might have some dysbiosis going on.

I have this, I have this, I have this. They're doing their little checkbox. What are some effective evidence-based ways that women can support their vaginal microbiome?

Yeah. So as we mentioned, a lot of those lifestyle things are really key to pay attention to the things that we're inserting, whether they're lubricants or washes are something that we want to be really mindful of how each of those ingredients can affect the microbiome.

We also want to think about how our diet plays a role, things that we can control that may change what feeds good bacteria versus bad bacteria. So we know there's data that suggests that things like omega-3s or healthy fats can be supportive for patients that are trying to maintain the vaginal microbiome space, but More specifically, when we're thinking about patients that are really struggling with an overgrowth of unwanted pathogens or bad bacteria.

The main protector for most women that we're seeing is a greater dominance of particular species like that Lactobacillus crispitus. And so looking for particular over-the-counter supplements can take orally that can help support the Lactobacillus crispitus dominance in the vagina tends to be supportive and shifting that vaginal

microbiome space.

Yeah, two things I want to touch on for effective ways to support the vaginal microbiome. So I think nutrition is super important. I think that we know that bad bacteria thrives off of things like, you know, processed foods, sugars, and things like that.

So there's definitely a lot of specifics we could go into for nutrition, but I think overall, making sure you're well hydrated is one too, like you want to be clearing things out.

So being well hydrated means you're going to urinate more, urinostero, and so that's going to help clear things out. So I think hydration is really important in times like that too.

getting rid of processed sugary foods, it just spreads not only vaginal, but also gut dysbiosis as well, wreaks havoc in there. So cleaning up and eating more whole foods, leafy green vegetables, things like that, that's really going to support a diverse diet.

supports a diverse microbiome. And there is a connection between the gut and the vagina because we haven't gotten into this topic yet, but taking probiotics orally can still help vaginal microbiome as well.

So we'll kind of get into that in a second. So I think nutrition is a really big, hydration is another big one. And then also I think hormonal support is another area of opportunity, because we were just talking about declining estrogen and things like that.

having a big impact on the food and the fuel for our vaginal microbiome. So those are just a few things that I wanted to highlight in that part of the conversation.

And one thing I also wanted to hit on is we kind of talked a little bit about hygiene, where we talked about maybe soaps and detergents and stuff like that.

Testing and Supporting Vaginal Health

But in addition to that, Is there, you know, if a woman is doing too many things for their vaginal health, like their douching or overuse of products and things like that, are there things that we could be doing too much of that might be perceived as healthy but could be doing us more harm?

Yeah, absolutely. We prefer to avoid inserting any sort of external chemicals in the vagina. you know, best option is just to use water when we're cleaning the vaginal entry points.

And so really the over-the-counter products that are sold as douches or vaginal washes oftentimes are not particularly modified to support the pH balance that we prefer.

So we touched a little bit, or I just mentioned briefly that taking oral probiotics can also help your vaginal microbiome as well. Can you tell us a little bit about how oral supplements can be utilized in the different ways of applications for probiotics for vaginal microbiome support?

Absolutely. So I work with a company that has really prioritized using data to inform the formulations of our products. And so we've looked at various clinical studies on women that had vaginal environments that were more susceptible to infections.

And we were able to look at how introduction to specific probiotic species, like the lactobacillus species we talked about, can be helpful in improving symptoms associated with vaginal discomfort.

And so by taking oral microbiome products, specifically the Vaginal Balance product from Microbiome Labs. We've been able to help support women have less vaginal discomfort and improve their symptoms related to their vaginal health.

Okay, and they can take those orally and that allows the bacteria to also go from our gut and also help vaginally. Is there a time or a place that you would apply a probiotic differently?

Yeah, so we know that, as you mentioned, you know, our gut health, our digestive health is really critical. And sometimes the best thing to do when we have patients with recurrent vaginal symptoms is to step back and say, you know, is this patient having a daily bowel movement or are they really constipated where there's a ton of bacteria that's sitting in their colon for a prolonged period of time.

So all the things you mentioned about improving our fiber intake and keeping our bowel movements moving more regularly can also take into consideration if there's other supportive probiotic species we need to address first to help optimize stool function.

Perfect. And so if a woman feels like she's being dismissed or unheard about vaginal symptoms, what should she advocate for? What kind of provider should she look for?

Yeah, that's a great question. So, healthcare providers that have particular training in functional medicine or integrative medicine, where healthcare providers have had perhaps the North American and AAPAW Society training which you can find on the North American Menopause Society page, can indicate that a healthcare provider has done additional training in those transitional states for women during the peri and menopausal periods of time.

Those are all considerations that I take into account when I'm thinking about healthcare providers that might have additional training in the microbiome.

when we're thinking about having providers that can assist us with understanding the delicate dance between using medications that help eradicate pathogens when they're really problematic, but also really be intentional about using probiotics mindfully.

It is really important to make sure that you're speaking with a provider that has that training that can support you. Yeah. If you're already taking a probiotic right now, is what should somebody look for to see if this is supporting both their gut and their vaginal microbiome?

Yeah, so, you know, when we think about gut health, there's many different ways that we can support ourselves from a probiotic standpoint. I always like to incorporate spore-based probiotics.

For example, our Megaspore Biotic product from Microbiome Labs is a staple for many patients that are trying to improve their gut microbiome space. When I'm thinking about the vaginal microbiome though, specifically, it's a probiotic that includes those species we talked about, the Lactobacillus crispinus, the Lactobacillus gensinii, and the Lactobacillus gasseri that are really key in driving that pH we talked about.

So I'm looking for a probiotic vaginal balance that has all three of those. Perfect. So you might not be getting all of this in a gut probiotic. So if you are experiencing symptoms or you want to, you know, one thing that I like to do is I cycle through so that I'm not getting pill fatigue, but I'm also supporting all areas of my body where I will do a gut probiotic and then the next day I'll do a vaginal probiotic and I'm not getting so pill fatigued and that helps me stay compliant.

But if you are taking a probiotic, just because it's a probiotic doesn't mean that it's going to be targeting vaginal dysbiosis. You really do need to look for the right blend with the right species in it.

And I would say there's a lot of products out on the market. We launched another podcast that we did with Amanda Moss a few weeks ago, I believe, where we kind of talked about supplements and the quality of supplements.

But in our industry, I think it's really important to know the quality of supplements matter here. And I think for probiotics, that's just a really big piece of that puzzle because you need the bacteria to get through certain gastric acids so that it's still working when it gets to where it needs to go.

So quality products, not just what's in it, but who makes it. Who's recommending it? Does it have a delayed release capsule? Is that what you need for this particular product and things like that?

There's so many questions, which I think is really why I love our providers and our network so much because we've already curated and asked all of those questions so that we're recommending the right products to the right people with the right efficacy and all of that stuff.

So I appreciate your companies like yours that do the work to get these high quality products. in our practitioner's hands so that we can support patients the way that they need to be supported and they can have the results that they're looking for.

Absolutely. Yeah, quality makes a big difference. It does. I wanted to do a rapid fire myth busting with you really quick before we close out and go into some of our takeaways.

So I just have four myths that I want to demystify. One. Is all discharge bad? No, for women commonly we can see vaginal discharge and it's not necessarily a sign of anything that is wrong.

Choosing the Right Probiotic and Provider

It's actually sometimes a sign of things that are going right. You should have discharge at different times of your cycle when you're entering different phases like the luteal phase.

It can be a sign of fertility and that your body is ready for stuff. So discharge isn't bad. That's a common myth that, oh, I've got discharge, something's wrong.

Not necessarily. There should be some there. Okay. Myth number two. If it smells, something is wrong. This is important consideration. So this is when I like to test and not guess.

If you know that there's a shift in what your normal odor of the vaginal discharge smells like, it's a good idea to consult with your health care provider.

There's really easy ways to see what's going on. And in those situations, especially if there's a change in the odor, Test, don't guess. Test, don't guess.

I love that. So number three, probiotics are one size fits all. We know that there's no microbiome for any human that's the same. And so we are much like snowflakes and that no two are the same and we each have very different microbial makeup.

So our probiotics should be just as unique as we are. And so really having uniquely designed probiotics that can be mindful of our individual needs are really key.

Perfect. I agree, probiotics are not a one size fits all. Everybody has their unique needs, our guts, even our skin, now our vaginal microbiome. We have all these new needs.

And last but not least, aging means discomfort and is inevitable. So although aging can certainly present those risks, like we talked about with the shift in estrogen and shift in our natural lactobacillus stores, really we now know that we can use interventions that can help restore and help keep us protected.

So we really shouldn't ever assume that aging should be associated with discomfort. And we know that we have tools available to help keep us protected and more comfortable.

It is a really important time to be mindful of our vulnerability and be really proactive, but we're really grateful to have tools available now. Absolutely.

Well, I want to say thank you so much for being with us today. As we wrap up, I do want to leave our listeners with

some simple takeaways because this topic can be overwhelming and it doesn't need to be.

And I think first to understand is that your microbiome is dynamic. Women have an extra microbiome and that is our vaginal microbiome. And because we have symptoms does not mean that it's broken.

The vaginal microbiome changes throughout your life. It responds to stress, it responds to hormones, medications, aging, even seasons of life like pregnancy or menopause.

And if something feels off, it doesn't mean that your body has failed you. It means that your body is adapting and is asking for support. And number two, Symptoms are information, things like irritation, reoccurring infections, dryness, discomfort.

They're not random and they're not something that you need to ignore. Again, the symptoms is your body's way of communicating that something has shifted and they're not a personal flaw or a hygiene issue.

It's data that you're collecting and it deserves to be taken seriously. And then third is support should feel personalized, not embarrassing. Conversations about vaginal and microbiome health should feel respectful.

It should feel validating and it should feel tailored towards you.

Myth Busting and Key Takeaways

You should feel comfortable asking questions. You should feel comfortable advocating for yourself. You should feel comfortable seeking care that looks at your full picture.

not just quick fixes or one size fits all. So at the end of the day, this isn't about doing things more or being perfect. It's about awareness and education and understanding how your body works so that you can make informed decisions to support your health.

So those are the last little closings that I would like to leave our listeners with. Maureen, tell our listeners where they can learn more about you and follow your work.

Well, as you mentioned, I'm a clinical science liaison with NovoNASIS. And so much of our education is primarily available through healthcare providers.

And so speaking with your healthcare provider is a great way to learn more. Anyone that does have a healthcare provider license can access Microbiome Labs education and webinars through the MicrobiomeLabs.com website.

Perfect. Thank you so much. Maureen, it was such a pleasure and thank you for sharing your knowledge and helping break down a topic that's very misunderstood and overlooked a lot.

For anyone who's listening and who wants to learn more, please make sure that you like and subscribe to the podcast. Before we wrap up, I just want to close and leave you with, if you are experiencing any symptoms, your body is not broken.

The vaginal microbiome is a dynamic responsive system that changes across your life. This conversation isn't about perfection or doing more. It's about understanding what's happening beneath the surface, asking better questions and knowing that reoccurring symptoms are not something that you have to normalize or quietly live with.

Thank you so much, Maureen, for helping bring clarity, compassion, and science to women's health. And to everyone listening, if this episode helped you better understand your body, follow, like, and share with somebody who needs to hear it.

Education is often the first step towards better care. Thank you and we'll see you next time. Thank you for joining us on the Forum Health Integrative Medicine podcast.

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