

# Facts and Fiction about the Hymen



## Introduction

Across the globe, misconceptions abound about virginity and what the hymen is and isn't. Girls, boys, mothers and fathers hear all kinds of conflicting stories. Stories that are not all true.

The most commonly held belief is that the hymen is a membrane that closes off the entrance to the vagina. The first time you have sexual intercourse, the penis breaks through this membrane, causing blood to flow.

### But did you know that

- The hymen is not in fact a membrane but a rim of tissue at the opening of the vagina.
- The rim can have different forms.
- Many girls and women do not bleed during their first sexual contact.

### Didn't you know that?

Then read this brochure containing answers to the most frequently asked questions about the hymen. You may be surprised by some of the answers because the information does not tally with the stories you have heard repeated all around you.

Bear in mind that this information is based on medical facts. You may even be relieved to discover that the truth is not what you thought it was.

### When are you a virgin?

Everyone, boys and girls, men and women, are born as virgins. A virgin is someone who has never had sex. If you make love to someone for the first time, meaning when a boy puts his penis in a girl's vagina, you lose your virginity. The moment a boy has sexual intercourse with a girl, he also loses his virginity.



About eight out of ten girls (80%!) do not notice any physical signs when losing their virginity. This is often unexpected and therefore you may feel relieved. Generally, girls have been taught that their vagina's will bleed and hurt, when they have sexual intercourse for the first time.

Sometimes, a girl worries when she does not bleed the first time. Especially, if she has told her boyfriend that she has not had sex with anyone and therefore is still a virgin. A lot of people claim that the hymen has already been broken, if the vagina does not bleed during a girl's first sexual intercourse. A girl who claims to still be a virgin, but who does not bleed, is thus said to be lying about her virginity. "She has had sex before, but was afraid to tell her boyfriend", one often hears people say.

### What does the hymen look like?

The hymen can have different forms. Next to this text you can see diagrams of three different examples. In most girls, the hymen is a flexible rim of tissue at the opening of the vagina. This tissue often looks serrated and sometimes smoother. In some girls the rim is thicker and tighter. But here too there is an opening to allow the menstrual blood out.

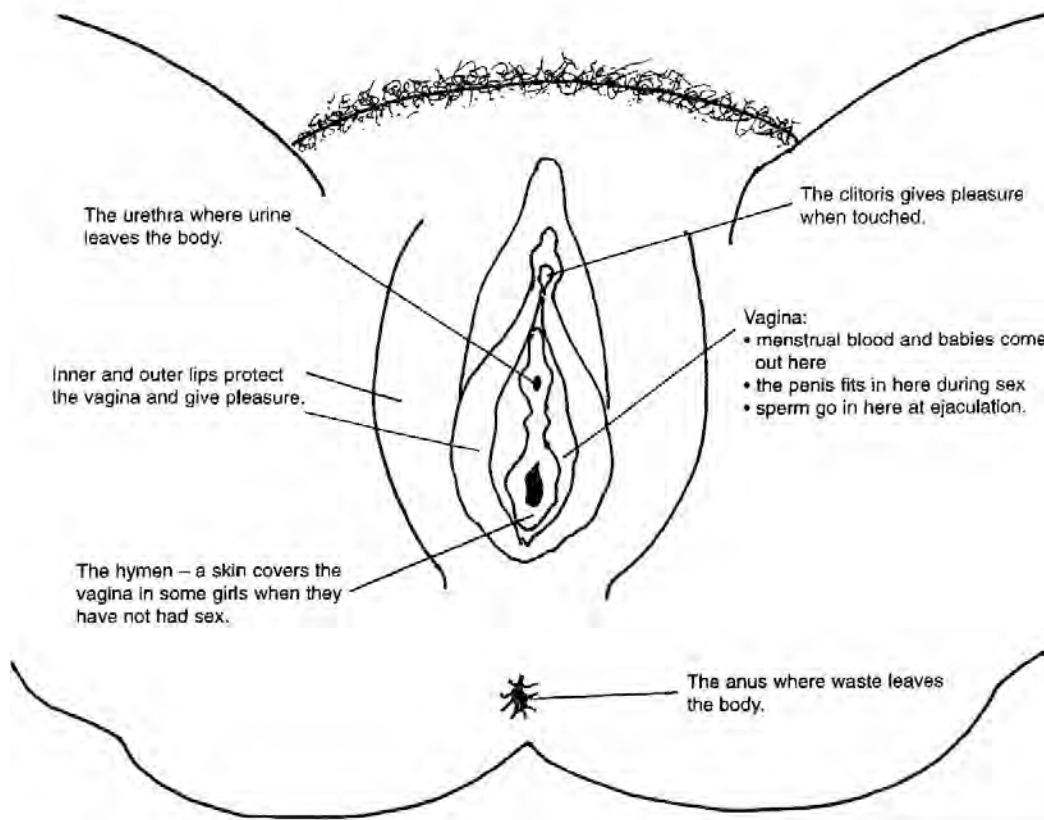
### Is the hymen a membrane?

The word membrane often conjures up the image of a very thin piece of skin that is stretched taut. Just like the tympanic membrane in your ear. But the hymen is not a membrane.

It is a rim on the inside of your vagina. And that rim can feel tight or loose and flexible.

### Where exactly is the hymen situated?

The rim is at the opening of the vagina. Not, as many boys and girls think, deep inside the vagina. If you want to feel where it is, penetrate your vagina gently with your finger just a little way. If you don't feel any rim it means it is so flexible that you can't feel it.



### Why do some girls not bleed the first time they have sexual intercourse?

If your vagina is relaxed and moist, the boy's penis will slide in easily. Then you will not bleed during your first time having sex. The chance of not bleeding and not feeling any pain is greater if you take the time for sex and make sure that you feel at ease with the boy.

### Why is it that some girls *do* bleed the first time they have sexual intercourse?

Bleeding during the first sexual contact can occur if the vagina is not moist enough and if you feel a little tense. If the boy still enters you with his penis, the vagina can bleed. In a few exceptional cases bleeding during the first sexual contact is caused by the fact that the rim is too tight to let the penis through. If the boy still tries to push his way in, the rim can tear and bleed a little.

It is, by the way, also possible that you can bleed during the second, third or another time that you have sex. This usually means that you are tense or that your vagina is too dry.

### Can boys feel that a girl is still a virgin during sex?

Boys that claim they can feel that a girl is still a virgin don't know what they are talking about. What a boy *can* feel is if the girl is scared or tense. Then the entrance to the vagina becomes tighter. But it says nothing about whether or not a girl has had sex before.



Tulay (aged 17) :

"I Want to stay a virgin and go to great lengths to do so. For example, I don't use tampons and have never participated in sports since I got my period. Recently, on the radio I heard a doctor talking about the hymen. Now I know that I was being silly and I go to aerobics classes again. If I don't bleed later, I know that it will have nothing to do with taking exercise".

**Can a doctor determine whether or not a girl is still a virgin by conducting an internal examination?**

The doctor can examine the rim to see if it is taut or flexible. The doctor can however almost never determine whether or not a girl has had an erect penis in her vagina. Even so, doctors sometimes give a declaration of virginity in order to protect the girl from difficult and negative reactions from her family.

**Can the hymen tear during gym, horse-riding or through using a tampon?**

No, and this also includes if you spread your legs very wide apart. If we presume that the rim in your vagina has the usual, most common form, then you will not bleed if you put a tampon in properly. Some girls avoid using tampons just to be on the safe side.

**Does a boy have to use extra force if he tries to enter the vagina with an erect penis?**

It is a widely believed fable that the hymen is a very strong membrane that can only be broken open using brute force. The truth is that the boy does not have to use any extra force because he does not have to push his way through anything. But if the girl is tense, it can seem as if the boy has to use a lot of force to get inside her vagina with his penis.

Rachid (aged 17):

"All those stories about penetrating the hymen, the pain and the blood when first having sex made me feel pretty insecure. First I thought: "What the hell, I'm going to push hard and be done with it." But at the end of the day I couldn't. So I broached the subject and it turned out that she felt frightened too. From then on it was easier: we made love carefully. It did not hurt and she did not bleed. I felt quite relieved."

**Why is the hymen so important for some girls?**

In some cultures it is very important that a girl is a virgin when she marries. That means that she cannot have any sexual contact before her marriage. But the question is how you can check whether or not the girl has had sexual contact if her hymen is still intact. During the wedding night, it is assumed that the man has to penetrate the hymen and cause bleeding. If the girl does not bleed on her wedding night that is supposed to prove that she did have previous sexual contact. This belief is contradicted by medical fact. There are girls who don't bleed the first time they have sex. This is because they take the time for sex, are sufficiently aroused and therefore the vagina is moist, and because the rim is naturally flexible. This means that the penis can slide in effortlessly.

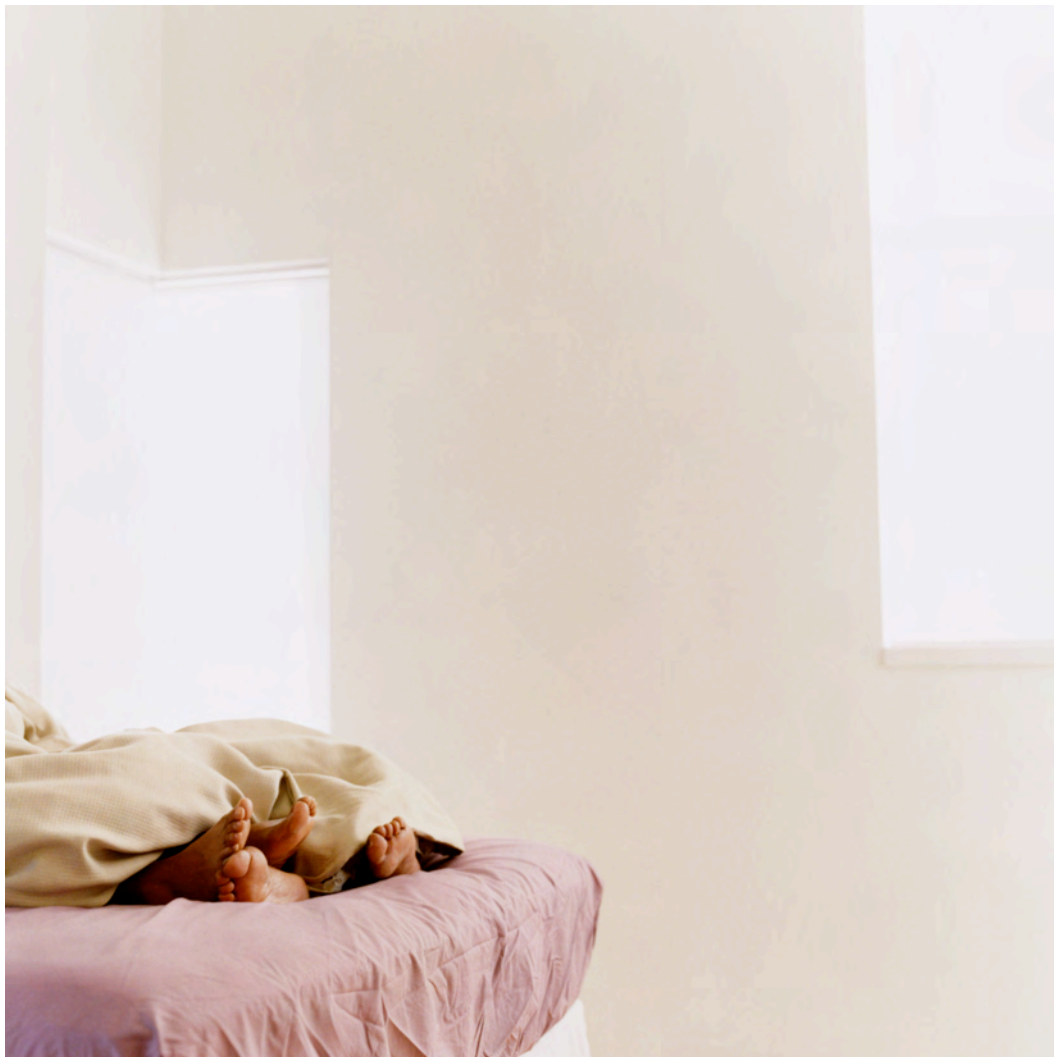
Amina (aged 16):

"To me its very important that I marry as a virgin. I make out with my boyfriend but I don't yet go to be bed with him. To me it's not about the hymen question, but rather that I want to save it as something special for the wedding night. I know you don't necessarily bleed the first time you go to bed with a boy. This emphasis on blood seems to be quite ritualistic to me. I hear from girlfriends that there are ways to make sure you do bleed on the wedding night."

### How do you make yourself bleed during the wedding night?

For many girls it is important to fulfil the demand that they bleed on their wedding night. Most girls who have had no sexual contact prior to their marriage trust that their "hymen" will bleed. Because they are nervous and tense the first time, this happens as planned. If, however, they don't bleed, they are often unjustly accused of having had other men and this can get them into serious trouble.

Girls that *have* had sexual contact before their marriage, are often thrown into anxiety. They look for ways to still bleed during their wedding night. Some choose for a creative approach: they prick their finger and stain the sheet with that blood. Others ask their doctors for a reconstruction operation.



### What is a reconstruction operation?

In a reconstruction operation, the rim of tissue at the opening of the vagina is tightened. Because this narrows the entrance to the vagina, the chance of bleeding during sexual intercourse is greater. But even after undergoing a reconstruction operation, not all girls will bleed simply because their vaginas are sufficiently moist and relaxed during sex. The name 'reconstruction operation' is of course inaccurate. The hymen is not a membrane that can be damaged. So there is nothing to reconstruct.

Ingrid (aged 14) :

"I once read that riding horses could tear your hymen. Now, I have ridden horses a lot so I thought 'that's great, my hymen will already be gone when I have sex for the first time with a boy and there will be no pain'. But I was to be disappointed. When I decided to go to bed with Tim for the first time, I found it quite scary. It felt rough and it hurt as well. Later I found blood in the sleeping bag and I found that really strange".

### Who would you turn to if you have any questions about the hymen?

You can talk to a friend, your mother, or your family doctor, but you could also visit a Centre for Sexuality and Birth control.