

CHAPTER 3

A woman's body in pregnancy

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A woman's body in pregnancy

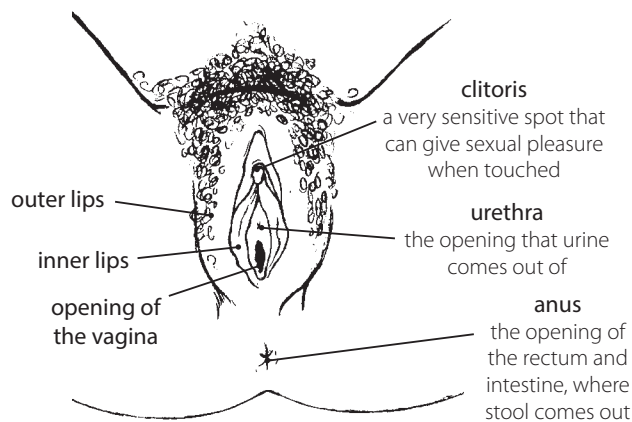


In this chapter, we describe the parts of a woman's body that are most affected by sex, pregnancy, and birth. We call these parts sexual or reproductive parts. We also explain how pregnancy happens, and how a woman's body changes during pregnancy.

staying well

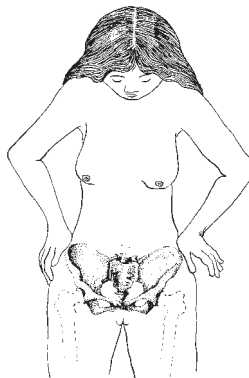
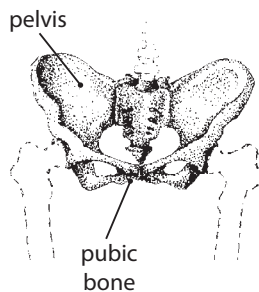
A woman's sexual and reproductive parts

A woman's genitals (vulva)

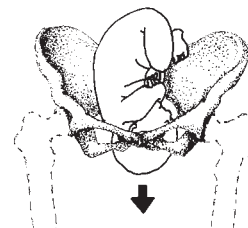


The pelvis

The bones below the belly are called the pelvis.



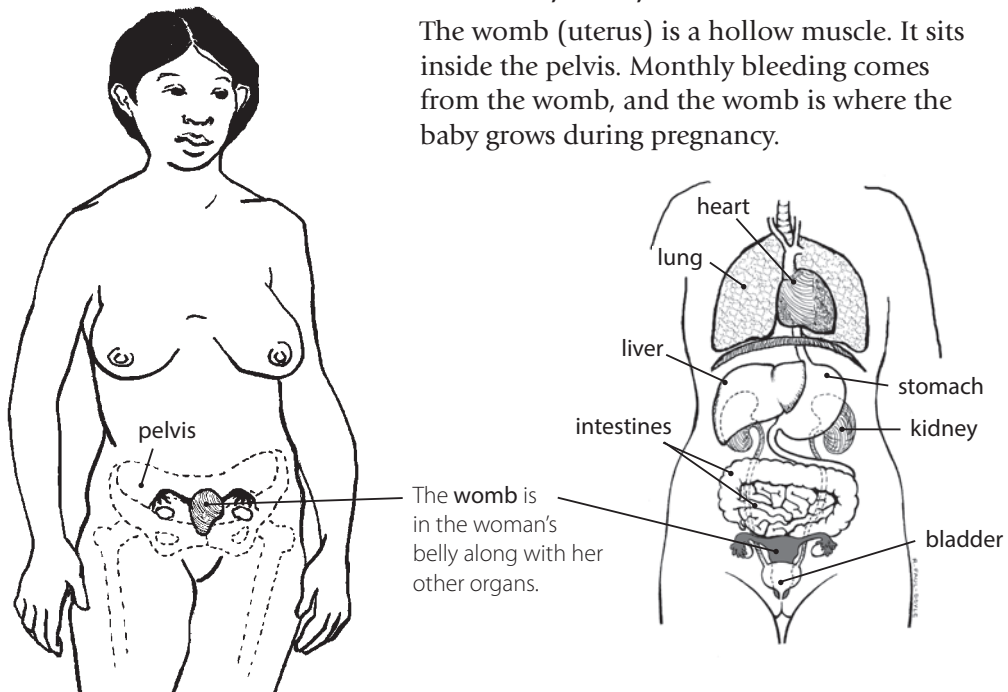
The pelvis is shaped like a bowl with a hole in the bottom.



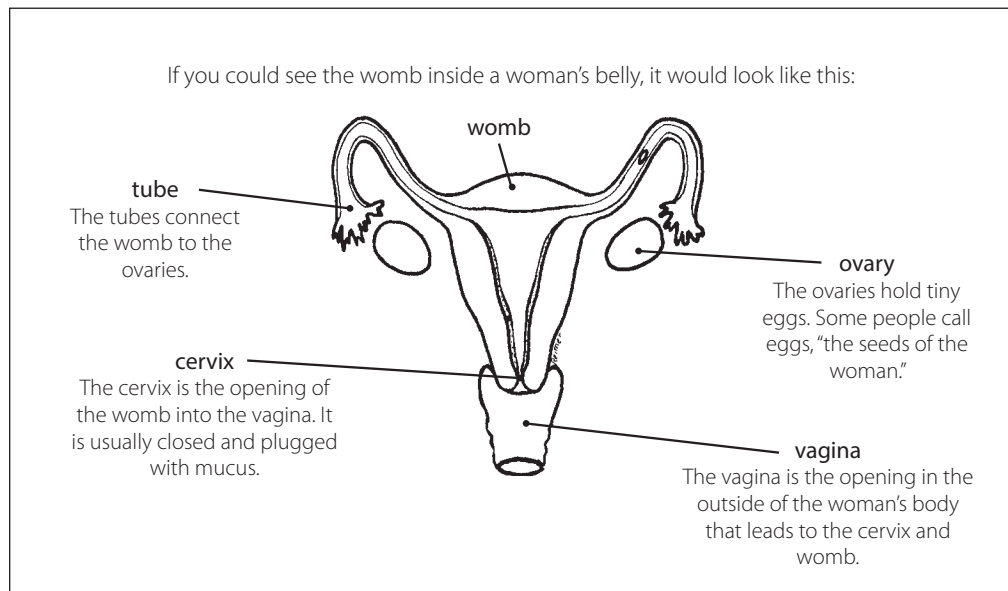
During birth, the baby passes through the hole to get out.

The womb, tubes, and ovaries

The womb (uterus) is a hollow muscle. It sits inside the pelvis. Monthly bleeding comes from the womb, and the womb is where the baby grows during pregnancy.



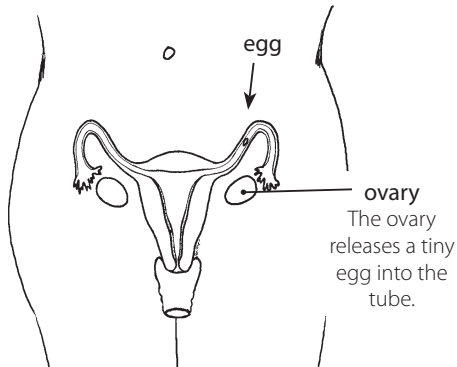
If you could see the womb inside a woman's belly, it would look like this:



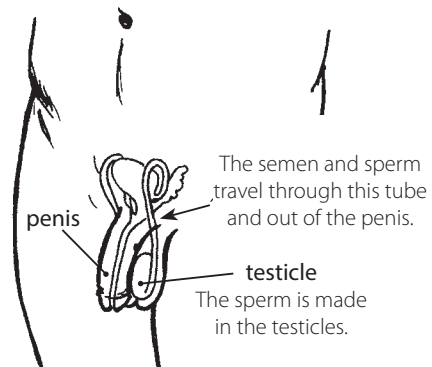
How women become pregnant

(if neither partner is using family planning)

About once a month, a woman's ovary releases a tiny egg. The egg moves down the tube and into the womb.

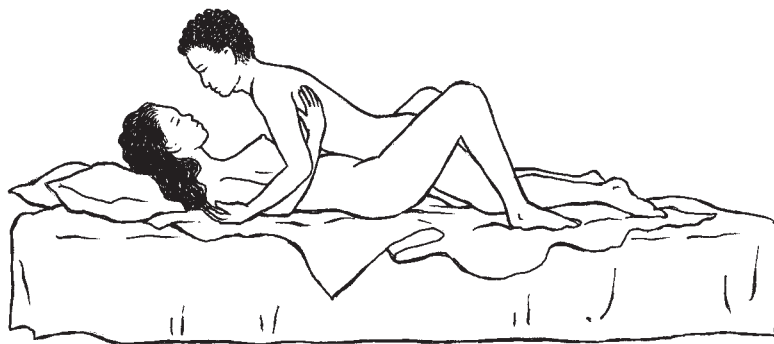


Men make tiny cells called sperm inside of their testicles. When a man ejaculates (comes), a fluid called semen comes out of his penis. Millions of sperm cells come out in that fluid.



If a man ejaculates inside a woman's vagina during sex, his sperm cells can travel through her vagina, through her womb, and into her tubes.

If the woman and man have penis-in-vagina sex near the time of the month that the woman's egg is moving down her tube, one of the man's sperm cells may meet her egg. The egg may then implant itself in the lining of the womb. If this happens, the woman becomes pregnant.



Every month that the woman does not become pregnant, the bloody lining of her womb comes out about 2 weeks after she releases the egg. We call this monthly bleeding, or menstruation.

How the baby grows

After a sperm and egg join inside a woman's womb, they combine to become one group of cells that multiply and grow into a baby.

The mother's blood contains oxygen from the air she breathes and nutrition from the food she eats. Her blood then passes oxygen and nutrition to the baby through the cord and placenta.

During the first 3 months of pregnancy, it is hard to see much happening from the outside. But inside the womb, the baby is forming organs, bones, and other body parts. During these early months, it is especially important that a pregnant woman avoid poisonous chemicals, unnecessary medicines, and alcohol, which can all harm the developing baby. As the baby grows, so does the womb. The mother can see her belly growing and can feel the womb by putting a hand on her belly.

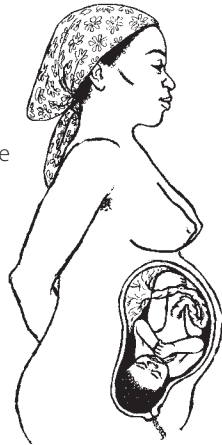


When a woman is about 5 months pregnant, she can feel the top of her womb at her bellybutton.



When a woman is 9 months pregnant, she can feel the top of her womb just below her ribs.

This is what you would see if you could look inside a pregnant woman's womb.



Inside the womb, the baby floats in a bag of fluid called amniotic fluid (the bag of waters). The baby is connected to the placenta (afterbirth) by a cord, and the placenta is attached to the inside of the mother's womb.

Infertility

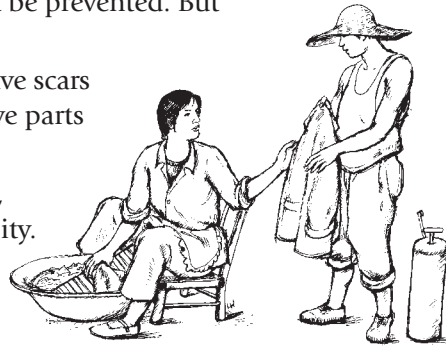
When a person has difficulty having a child, they are infertile. We say a couple is infertile when they cannot get pregnant after having unprotected penis-in vagina sex several times a week for a year.

For a couple that wants to have children, infertility can bring sadness, anger, or shame. Often the woman is blamed when she does not become pregnant. Even if the couple gets medical help, many doctors will check only the woman for fertility problems. But often the man is the one who is infertile. Neither men nor women should be blamed for infertility. And both need support during this difficult time.



Infertility has many causes. Some cannot be prevented. But many causes of infertility are preventable.

- Sexually transmitted infections can leave scars inside a man's or woman's reproductive parts that prevent pregnancy.
- Illnesses such as diabetes, tuberculosis, malaria, and mumps can cause infertility.
- Dangerous chemicals from pesticides, cleaning products, or factories can get into the air, water, or food. These chemicals can harm both men and women, making pregnancy difficult or impossible. They can also harm the growing baby.
- Smoking, chewing tobacco, drinking a lot of alcohol or using drugs can all harm fertility.



Even washing clothes that have dangerous chemicals on them can harm fertility.

There are other causes of infertility that are not preventable. To learn more, look at a general health book like *Where Women Have No Doctor*.

Menopause

When women grow older, they stop bleeding each month (menopause). They also stop producing eggs and lose the ability to become pregnant. For many people, this happens slowly over several years. For most women, this happens when they are between 45 and 55 years old.



During menopause, many women have some of these signs:

- changes in monthly bleeding before it stops completely
- suddenly feeling very hot and sweaty (hot flashes)
- vagina becomes smaller and more dry
- sudden changes in mood

Women may feel relieved when they do not have to worry about pregnancy or menstrual periods anymore. As elders, women can share the wisdom of their years of life experience.

Some symptoms of menopause can be treated with estrogen, either as pills taken by mouth (usually with progesterone) or as cream used on specific parts of the body. Talk to a health worker for more information.