

# Use of Feminine Hygiene Products in Thai Women

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To determine the prevalence and explore the knowledge, attitude and practice of using feminine hygiene products in Thai women.

**Methods:** A survey was conducted between May and August 2009 in 400 Thai women between the ages of 20-35 who attended at Siriraj Gynecological clinic. Questionnaires dealing with knowledge, attitudes and practice were completed and data were collected and analyzed.

**Results:** The mean age of participants was  $28.5 \pm 4.2$  years. The prevalence of participants who have ever used feminine wash and vaginal douche were 70.5% and 14.25%, respectively. To get rid of an unpleasant odor, and feeling clean and fresh were the most common reasons for using both products. The most common timing of using feminine wash was after period, after bath and when having unpleasant odor, whereas having leucorrhea and unpleasant odor were noted in vaginal douche group. Significant association between use of vaginal douche and an experience of sexual intercourse was observed ( $P < 0.05$ ).

**Conclusion:** Use of feminine hygiene products, especially feminine wash, was quite popular in Thai women. To get rid of unpleasant odor as well as to feel clean and fresh were common reasons for using this product. Recommendations by gynecologists about appropriate use of feminine hygiene products should be carefully considered in daily practice.

**Keywords:** Feminine hygiene products, feminine wash, vaginal douche

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To date, there is no clear evidence about feminine hygiene practice in Thai women. Studies about this issue has been conducted in many countries and in various aspects of feminine hygiene practice, e.g., type of feminine hygiene products, frequency of usage, and attitudes and behavior of using feminine hygiene products.<sup>1-4</sup> Various types of feminine hygiene products are widely publicized worldwide, such as sanitary pad, panty liner, feminine wash and vaginal douche.

The usage of these products, especially vaginal douche, is very common in many countries. A review in the United State revealed that regular douching occurred in about one third of women.<sup>5,6</sup> Similar to studies in Turkey, about a half of the study population used vaginal douche.<sup>7,8</sup> Feeling clean and fresh was a common reason of why women preferred using vaginal douche and also other products.<sup>1,2</sup> However, data from systematic review demonstrated that using vaginal douche was associated with many problems. Not only gynecological morbidity, such as bacterial vaginosis, ectopic pregnancy and increased

risk of sexually transmitted infections, but also adverse pregnancy outcomes, such as preterm labor, preterm birth and chorioamnionitis commonly occurred in those who had an experience of using vaginal douche.<sup>5,9-12</sup> Although discouragement of using vaginal douche is widely promoted, personal belief is stronger than clinical evidence.<sup>3,5</sup>

In Thailand, basic information about the use of feminine products is still unclear. Personal advice without fundamental knowledge by parents, friends and healthcare providers often occurs. Besides, using feminine hygiene product especially feminine wash is expected to increase in Thai women because of wide propagation through various advertisements.

The purpose of this study was to determine the prevalence of using feminine hygiene products in Thai women and also explore their knowledge, attitudes and practice.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

After approval by the Siriraj Institutional Review Board (SIRB), a survey was conducted between May and August 2009 at an outpatient clinic of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital, Mahidol University. Inclusion criteria were Thai

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women between 20-35 years old, who understood Thai language, and accepted and signed our informed consent. Women who were handicapped or could not take care of themselves were excluded.

All participants were asked to complete a questionnaire, consisting of demographic data and baseline characteristics, their knowledge, attitudes and practice of using feminine hygiene products. After completion of a questionnaire, all data were recorded and analyzed. Descriptive statistics were reported as mean, standard deviation, number and percentage. Chi-square was used to compare between groups as appropriate. Statistical significance was considered if the p-value was less than 0.05.

## RESULTS

A total of 400 Thai women were enrolled in this study. Table 1 showed baseline characteristics of our study population. The mean age of our participants was  $28.5 \pm 4.2$  years old, the majority was married (72.25%), worked as an employee (45.25%) and had graduated in bachelor degree (43%). Most of them (86.25%) have ever had sexual intercourse. Their age at first sexual intercourse mostly occurred after the age of 18 (69%). About one third (30%) of them have ever had an experience of abnormal leucorrhea. The prevalence of participants who have ever used feminine wash was 70.5%, whereas 14.25% have ever used vaginal douche.

The practice and reason for using feminine hygiene products were shown in table 2. The most common timing of using feminine wash was after period, after bath and when having adverse odor. While the most common timings of using vaginal douche were after their period, when having leucorrhea and unpleasant odor. To get rid of an unpleasant odor, feeling clean and fresh were the most common reasons why women chose to use both products.

Table 3 revealed knowledge and attitudes about feminine hygiene products. About 58-73% and 45-68% in feminine wash and vaginal douche groups, respectively, did not know or were not sure when answering the questions.

The association between an experience of sexual intercourse, having leucorrhea and use of feminine hygiene products was presented in tables 4 and 5. The use of vaginal douche was significantly associated with an experience of sexual intercourse ( $P < 0.05$ ). Although there was no significant difference in the feminine wash group ( $P > 0.05$ ), the majority of Thai women who have ever had sexual intercourse preferred feminine wash when compared with vaginal douche (72.2% vs. 12.2%, respectively). In the aspect of leucorrhea, there was no significant difference between each product ( $P > 0.05$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Because of Thai culture and tradition, discussion about sexual topics is a sensitive issue in Thailand. Previous studies in many countries revealed that using feminine hygiene products especially vaginal douche was very common in women's lives.<sup>5-8</sup> However, an association between vaginal douche and many adverse health conditions have been reported.<sup>5,9-12</sup> Nowadays, commercial advertisements about feminine hygiene products are widely seen in Thailand and these are supposed to affect feminine hygiene care in Thai women.

Different from previous studies, although the use of feminine hygiene products was very common in Thai

**TABLE 1.** Baseline characteristics of our study population (N = 400).

	N (%)
Mean age $\pm$ SD (years)	28.5 $\pm$ 4.2
Marital status	
Single	97 (24.25)
Marriage	291 (72.75)
Others	12 (3)
Religion	
Buddhism	395 (98.75)
Others	5 (1.25)
Occupation	
Employee	181 (45.25)
Government officer	54 (13.5)
Businessman/private practice	64 (16)
Others	101 (25.25)
Education	
Primary school	54 (13.5)
Secondary school	158 (39.5)
Diploma	16 (4)
Bachelor degree	172 (43)
Sexual intercourse	
Ever	345 (86.25)
Age at 1 <sup>st</sup> sexual intercourse	
< 15 year	5 (1.25)
15-18 year	64 (16)
19-22 year	149 (37.25)
> 22 year	127 (31.75)
Never	55 (13.75)
Experience of abnormal leucorrhea	
Never	280 (70)
Occasionally	50 (12.5)
Once a month	16 (4)
Once a few months	18 (4.5)
Once a year	36 (9)
Experience of using feminine hygiene product	
Feminine wash	282 (70.25)
Vaginal douche	57 (14.25)
Never use any products	61 (15.25)

**TABLE 2.** Timing and reasons of using feminine hygiene products.

	Feminine wash N = 282 (%)	Vaginal douche N = 57 (%)
Timing of using feminine hygiene products		
After period	114 (40.4)	24 (42.1)
When bathing	71 (25.2)	5 (8.8)
Unpleasant odor	59 (20.9)	11 (19.3)
After sex	16 (5.7)	3 (5.2)
Having leucorrhea	15 (5.3)	12 (21.1)
Before sex	7 (2.5)	2 (3.5)
Reason of using feminine hygiene products*		
Get rid of an unpleasant odor	150 (53.2)	19 (33.3)
Feeling clean and fresh	141 (50)	26 (45.6)
After period	117 (41.5)	16 (28)
After sex	48 (17)	11 (19.3)
Reduction of genital infection	44 (15.6)	16 (28)
Reduction of leucorrhea	19 (6.7)	16 (28)
Suggestion from her friend	15 (5.3)	2 (3.5)

\* More than one answer was acceptable

**TABLE 3.** Knowledge and attitude about use of feminine hygiene products.

	Yes N (%)	No N (%)	Not know or not sure N (%)
Feminine wash (N = 282)			
Can it reduce genital infection?	61 (21.6)	55 (19.5)	166 (58.9)
Can it increase genital infection?	32 (11.3)	43 (15.2)	207 (73.5)
Vaginal douche (N = 57)			
Can it use for contraception?	4 (7)	24 (42.1)	29 (50.9)
Can it reduce genital infection?	26 (45.6)	5 (8.8)	26 (45.6)
Can it increase genital infection?	16 (28.1)	6 (10.5)	35 (61.4)
Can it increase risk of ectopic pregnancy?	4 (7)	14 (24.6)	39 (68.4)
Can it increase risk of genital cancer?	6 (10.5)	13 (22.8)	38 (66.7)

**TABLE 4.** Use of feminine hygiene products and an experience of sexual intercourse.

	Sexual intercourse		P-value
	Yes (%)	No (%)	
Feminine wash			
Yes	249 (72.2)	33 (60)	0.08
No	96 (27.8)	22 (40)	
Vaginal douche			
Yes	56 (16.2)	1 (1.8)	0.003*
No	289 (83.8)	54 (98.2)	

Statistically significant, P<0.05

**TABLE 5.** Use of feminine hygiene products and an experience of leucorrhoea.

	Leucorrhoea		P-value
	Yes (%)	No (%)	
Feminine cleansing			
Yes	189 (67.5)	93 (77.5)	0.055
No	91 (32.5)	27 (22.5)	
Vaginal douche			
Yes	41 (14.6)	16 (13.3)	0.876
No	239 (85.4)	104 (85.8)	

Statistically significant, P<0.05

women, feminine wash was more popular than vaginal douche in our population (70.25 vs. 14.25, respectively). This could possibly be from an increase in the number of and wide spread of advertisements about feminine wash which has influenced Thai women. In addition, feminine wash is easy to use, more tolerable<sup>13</sup> and another reason could be that it is easy to buy this product at nearby convenience stores, and it could be inferred that Thai women may not appreciate complicated items or invasive products like vaginal douche. However, there was no clear evidence about benefits and risks of using feminine wash in women's health. Whether it can cause adverse obstetrics or gynecological conditions is still unknown.

Similar to previous studies<sup>1,2</sup>, to get rid of unpleasant odor and feeling clean and fresh seem to be important reasons of why Thai women preferred feminine hygiene products. In addition, concern about infection might be another reason for using vaginal douche because they commonly used this product when they had leucorrhoea. Although evidence showed that there were many adverse conditions associated with using vaginal douche<sup>5</sup>, the

majority of our participants did not know or were not sure about these facts. We presumed that this may be caused by a lack of their basic knowledge about feminine hygiene products and this preliminary data should be beneficial for gynecologists when providing information about feminine hygiene care to their patients.

Compared with an experience of sexual intercourse, a previous study showed that use of a feminine hygiene product, especially vaginal douche, was more popular after menarche and marriage.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, we found from our study that women who have sexual intercourse had more experience of using vaginal douche (P <0.05). Although there was no significant difference, women who have sexual intercourse had also more experience of using feminine wash. To be more precise, in Thai women, the beginning of using feminine hygiene products occurred after the start of their active sexual lives. Therefore, healthcare providers who take care of reproductive aged patients should be concerned about this habit and provide appropriate advice about feminine hygiene care.

Our study still had some limitations. Firstly, information bias may occur during answering our questionnaire because asking about feminine hygiene care is a sensitive issue, especially in Thai culture. Secondly, enrolling only patients from a gynaecological outpatient clinic, may bias some aspects of feminine hygiene care, because some patients may regularly use feminine hygiene products for their pathology, for example, leucorrhoea and abnormal menstruation. The prevalence of using feminine hygiene products in our study may be higher than the general population. However, data from our study provided fundamental information about using feminine hygiene products in Thai women which may lead to further beneficial research.

To our knowledge, about half of our study population still had less knowledge and misunderstood the effects of using feminine hygiene products, especially vaginal douche. Instruction in proper feminine hygiene care should be considered by involved healthcare providers. Further research concerning the effects of feminine wash, should be performed to provide appropriate information and lead to standard recommendations in women's health care.

Finally, we concluded that using feminine hygiene products, especially feminine wash, was very popular in Thai women. To get rid of adverse odor as well as to feel clean and fresh were common reasons why Thai women used this product. Because of less knowledge of Thai women, recommendations of gynecologists about appropriate use of feminine hygiene products should be carefully considered in daily practice.

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