Roughly 1 in 3 women douche, but there is no good health reason to do so. Many women believe that douching will clean their vaginas or eliminate unpleasant odors, but that isn't true. Any benefits from douching are merely temporary. The downsides, however, are substantial. Douching can change the makeup of the bacteria that normally live in the vagina, and it can even make women more susceptible to STDs.

Now, researchers have added another concern: Douching appears to increase the risk of infection with HPV (human papillomavirus), which causes cervical cancer.

Researchers hailing mostly from the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center assessed the relationship between douching and HPV infection in 1,271 American women aged 20 to 49 who participated in a national epidemiological survey about 12 years ago. (More recent data was not available.) The data in that study included whether the women had douched within the past six months as well as the results of an HPV DNA test that could detect 37 different strains of the virus.

Previous studies on HPV and douching included women who had genital warts, which are caused by HPV strains 6 and 11. Because warts are very visible, the authors speculated that women who have them may douche more frequently, possibly skewing any link that might exist between douching and infection with other HPV strains. So, the authors excluded these women and focused on the remaining 35 HPV strains.

The authors found that douching increased the likelihood that a woman would be infected with a greater number of HPV strains by 26%. Worse, the risk of infection with a greater number of cancer-causing HPV strains was upped by 40%. The link between douching and being infected by a greater number of HPV strains was maintained even after the researchers controlled for other
risk factors, such as number of sexual partners.

The results, however, were not entirely conclusive. The relationship between the frequency of douching and the number of HPV strains with which a woman was infected was not significant. One would expect a strong correlation. Despite this caveat, the authors believe that douching may increase the risk of cervical cancer.

Thus, the moral of the story: Don't use douchebags. And don't be one, either.


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