

Australians speak out about the impacts that labia and vulva shame has on their lives – and why we need to normalise and celebrate just how diverse these important body parts are.

Real Bodies

**Understanding and Celebrating
Labia Diversity**



**Women's
Health Vic**





About Women's Health Victoria

Women's Health Victoria is a statewide, feminist, non-profit organisation working with government, the health sector, and the community to improve health outcomes for women (cis and trans inclusive) and gender diverse people. We advocate for healthcare rights and access, deliver health promotion resources, and operate vital information and support services, so that all Victorians have the opportunity to access optimal health and wellbeing, free from bias and discrimination.

Acknowledgement of Country

Women's Health Victoria acknowledges and pays our respects to the Traditional Owners of the land that our offices are situated on, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. As a statewide organisation, we also acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands and waters across Victoria. We pay our respects to them, their cultures and their Elders past and present.

Artist: Madison Connors - Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung, Gamilaroi



Our Commitment to Gender Diversity & Inclusion

Women's Health Victoria's focus is women (cis and trans inclusive) and gender diverse people. We address feminist health issues and are committed to supporting all people impacted by gender inequity who can benefit from our work. As a proud intersectional feminist organisation, Women's Health Victoria is working towards meaningful inclusivity, guided by and supporting people who identify as women, trans, intersex and gender diverse.

Foreword

Dr Melissa Kang

Adolescent health researcher, advocate and Labia Library ambassador

As proud ambassador for the Labia Library, I am honoured to introduce this important report on labia diversity and the impacts of labia and vulva shame. This report brings to light the voices and experiences of Australian women and people with labia, shedding light on a topic often shrouded in stigma and misunderstanding.

I had the privilege of answering questions from labia-owners for 23 years, through the Dolly Doctor Q&A column. I also worked as a doctor in a youth clinic for 30 years. When it came to talking about labia, I noticed a stark contrast in what I heard in these two roles. There were hundreds of questions about vaginas, vulvas and labia sent anonymously to Dolly Doctor. I would read exquisite detail about size, shape, smell, feel, lumps, juices, in this mystical, magical part of the body, sometimes with accompanying illustrations. Over time there were more and more questions about removing hair from vulvas – not 'should I?' but 'how do I?' Accompanying this trend, were more observations of labia which didn't conform to images seen in the very un-real world online – whether pornography or social media.

In my clinical work, the appearance of genitals was never brought up as a main concern. Nor was I ever directly asked about pubic hair removal, labia surgery, size, shape or smell. My long-held theory about this is backed by the research in this report – that labia-owners are embarrassed, ashamed or just too self-conscious to ever talk about it, in real life, with a health professional, or perhaps with anyone.

In answering Dolly Doctor questions about labia, I needed the Labia Library's help – but this excellent health resource only came into being in the final four years of the magazine's life. So, I could only use words to describe the wonderful diversity of labia there are in the world. As a clinic doctor, as part of a health check-up I would ask general questions about development. I might let patients know that lots of young people worry about their changing bodies, and that it might seem impossibly difficult to talk about. I would show them the Labia Library website too, if and when appropriate. I hoped that somewhere in all of that, I was able to provide reassurance, explain what incredible body bits the labia are, and also help reduce discomfort in talking about labia.

The polling results in this report tell us that there is still way too much labia shame, stigma and anxiety as well as plain old misinformation. But there's also some real labia positivity in this report too and that's worth celebrating. The updated, expanded Labia Library will continue to be a wonderful resource for everyone; like a treasured, favourite book or perhaps even a well-thumbed section of a magazine.

This report is a call to action to embrace and celebrate the diversity of labia. I extend my gratitude to Women's Health Victoria for their unwavering commitment to this cause and to all the individuals who bravely shared their stories as part of this research.



Table of Contents

Foreword	4
Overview	6
Changing how we see and talk about labia	12
Methodology	15
Key findings	16
Labia pride	17
The key drivers of labia shame and anxiety	19
Unpacking the impacts of labia shame	26
The Labia Library	30
Recommendations	32
Conclusion	34
References	35

Overview



When people say vagina, what they're often talking about is actually the labia – the folds of skin that sit on either side of your vaginal opening.

This includes the inner folds (inner lips of the vulva) which are known as the labia minora, and the outer folds (outer lips of the vulva), known as the labia majora.

Vulvas and labia have been a source of confusion, fascination, and shame for thousands of years. To this day, many people still can't correctly identify where these body parts are. More and better education on these body parts, in all of their wonderful diversity, is urgently needed.

Here's the good news: In a new national surveyⁱ conducted in April 2024 by Women's Health Victoria and YouGov, over a third of women and people with labia say they embrace this diversity – and feel happy and confident with the appearance of their labia.

ⁱ Of 1,030 Australian women and people with labia aged 18-50 years old. For more information, please see the Methodology section on page 15.

But for too many people with labia, this body part carries a lot of stigma and shame. In fact, one in six (16%) Australians with labia told us they are anxious or embarrassed about the way theirs look. Worryingly, this is heightened for Gen Z, with around one in four (23%) people aged 18-24 saying they feel anxious, ashamed or embarrassed by how their labia look, and almost a third (31%) associating their labia with negative words such as 'weird', 'disgusting' or 'ugly'.

And as the majority of us live our lives increasingly online, there is evidence that a significant proportion of young people are obtaining information on what 'normal' labia look like from porn, social media, and cosmetic surgery advertising, which tend to depict and discuss idealised genitalia with a symmetrical appearance and invisible labia minora. Often, they're altered by airbrushing or filters, and many porn performers and content creators have also had labial surgery.

What we want all people with labia to know, is that there is no medical definition of what normal labia look like because there is so much variation. There can be significant differences in size, colour, symmetry, texture and shape between individuals.

In fact, one in five (18%) of Gen Zs we surveyed said they obtain their information on what labia 'should look like' from porn. Almost a third (30%) said they obtained it from social media.

Anxiety around vulval appearance can have a number of concerning negative consequences – it can lead to people putting off visits to their GP for sexual and reproductive health issues or a pap smear; it can impact people's mental and emotional health; and it can influence their sexual relationships.

Evidence also suggests labia shame and stigma is a primary driver of labiaplasty, one of the fastest-growing cosmetic procedures amongst young people in Australia, and worldwide. Female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) was first described in 1976, and the first operations were undertaken in the mid-1980s. The term 'designer vagina' emerged in the popular vernacular to describe these procedures in the late 1990s and early 2000s.¹

In the decades since, demand for labiaplasty has only continued to increase. This procedure carries significant risks, including numbness, pain and scarring – particularly when performed on children younger than 18 years old, as they are more likely to experience complications due to the ongoing development of the labia throughout puberty.

A study of Australian general practitioners (GPs) in 2016 found that over a third of GPs surveyed had consulted with patients aged under 18 years for FGCS.² Global labiaplasty rates increased by 28% between 2015 and 2018, and a further 24% between 2018 and 2019.³

What's more, in our April 2024 survey, one in 10 respondents aged between 18 and 50 told us that they have considered labiaplasty. Extrapolated to the Australian population, that's approximately 549,000 people.

While those worried about the appearance of their labia are in the minority, the evidence of growing numbers of people seeking surgery and a higher proportion of younger people expressing concerns about their labia is cause for concern. Normalising diversity in labia appearance and ensuring this message is embraced, is crucial to countering negative associations.

Our research revealed a number of determinants of labia shame and anxiety – in particular, the role that mainstream online porn has – and a worrying number of impacts on people’s mental and physical health and their relationships.

Communicating and celebrating the diversity of labia online and through social media channels is important to fostering positive conversations regarding perceptions of labia and to encourage acceptance of differences, real or perceived.

A new campaign by Women’s Health Victoria, as part of its groundbreaking Labia Library, is aiming to re-ignite a conversation that embraces the diversity of labia. Its mission is to confront the shame, anxiety and worry that many people associate with their labia through education and by showing that unrealistic depictions in mass media and pornography are not the norm.

The Labia Library is a trusted, credible and one-of-a-kind resource that brings together diverse images of labia with practical, evidence-based information about this part of the body.

The newly updated Labia Library houses an expanded gallery of 104 unaltered and diverse photographs of vulva and labia to help show people just how unique all labia are. The gallery provides viewers with the opportunity to learn about the diversity of genitalia and make visual comparisons, in a safe and private way. The site also contains health information about anatomy, female genital cosmetic surgery, hair removal, media literacy and pornography, along with advice for health practitioners, health educators and parents.

Access to quality sexual and reproductive health information via resources such as the Labia Library positively impacts women and trans and gender diverse people’s health and wellbeing. It supports their ability to have pleasurable and respectful intimate relationships, and is a key driver for gender equality.

Worryingly, the number of people seeking cosmetic surgery on their labia is on the rise in Australia, particularly amongst people aged 18-35.



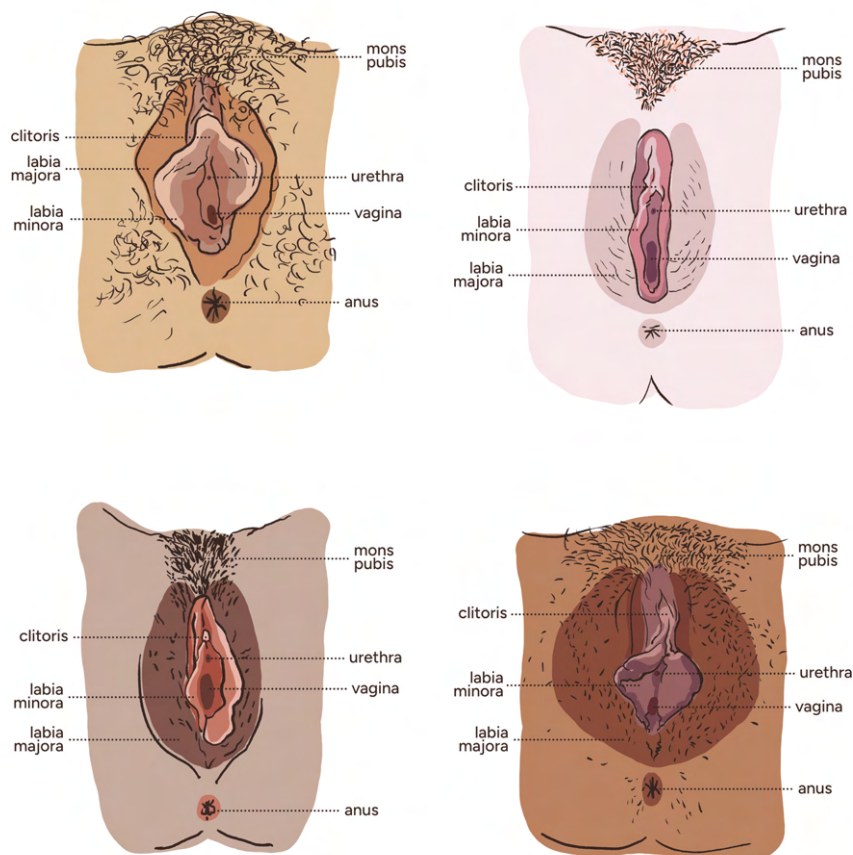
**One in 10 respondents
aged between 18 and 50
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*Extrapolated to the
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What are labia?

Labia are the folds of skin that sit on either side of your vaginal opening. This includes the inner folds (inner lips of the vulva) which are known as the labia minora, and the outer folds (outer lips of the vulva), known as the labia majora. They're sometimes referred to as lips or flaps – whatever you call them though, it's important to know that they are all different and come in all different shapes, sizes and colours. They can be dark or light, wrinkled or smooth, long or short. Sometimes this isn't obvious from what you see on the internet or in mainstream, popular pornography – which most commonly depicts tiny, tucked-in, hair-free 'Barbie slits' - or general ideas around how labia look.

The labia serve the very important purpose of protecting the urinary opening, the vaginal opening and the clitoris – and they're also full of nerve endings that play an important role in sex and pleasure. The reality is, more than half (56%) of all people with vulvas have visible, or protruding labia minora, and many have labia that are asymmetrical.⁴



Medical data fails to reflect the true rates of labiaplasty in Australia

Records are kept for procedures paid for or subsidised under Medicare, Australia's universal health insurance scheme. Between the years 2001 to 2013, Medicare claims for Medicare Benefits Schedule item 35533 (vulvoplasty and labiaplasty) more than doubled, increasing from 640 cases per annum to 1,565 cases per annum.⁵ Since 2014, procedures without medical indication are not publicly funded, which means no recent Medicare data is available. Reported figures are therefore conservative given that the majority of FGCS procedures are performed in private practice and there is a lack of reliable data with regard to the frequency or outcome of FGCS.

Research such as our survey, and anecdotal evidence from medical experts and GPs, indicates that the rate of labiaplasty in Australia is only continuing to rise, especially amongst young people. Further, intersectional data is rarely collected or reported, whether on ethnicity, disability, sexuality, gender identity or First Nations status. Without a rich data ecosystem, Australia will never be able to genuinely meet the needs and reflect the experiences of all girls, women and people with labia.

Changing how we see and talk about labia

'Normal' comes in all shapes and sizes... here are just some of the voices who are part of the movement destigmatising and celebrating labia and vulvas in all their diversity.



Dr Melissa Kang
(Adolescent health researcher, advocate - and Labia Library ambassador)

*"Probably the most frequently asked question in Dolly Doctor, in 23 years, was 'am I normal?' And I think the most common question that I started to get in recent years is the question about the inner labia protruding beyond the external labia, and a lot of anxiety about that. But the main message is that all vaginas, vulvas, labia, hymens, are all different, there is no one size fits all, literally."*⁶



Elizabeth Payne
(Body Positivity and Consent Advocate, NSW)

*"The young people I work with list the endless pressures they feel are placed on how their bodies should look, such as being hairless or having a 'tucked-in' slit... We cannot leave our young people thinking their bodies are wrong: we must encourage conversation that normalises and celebrates the differences in size, colour, symmetry, and shape of the vulva and labia."*⁷



Aimee Gibbs
(character from the
Netflix show *Sex
Education*)

"Um, my vagina doesn't look like this — one of my lip bits is longer than the other."

"This one has a longer labia, which is really common. This one's all tucked in. With pubes, without pubes. This one's more frilly...This one's crooked, like mine."⁸

"Seeing oneself represented in popular media can give you the reassurance that you are in fact normal, that you belong. It's what many of us are looking for."

"We've somehow gotten the idea that there's something wrong with us...But there isn't."⁹



Hilde Atalanta
(Dutch illustrator,
and the artist
behind *The Vulva
Gallery* and the sex
education book *A
Celebration of
Vulva Diversity*)



Liv Little (author)

"I hope that we can socialise boys and girls into understanding that women's bodies come in lots of different shapes and sizes. This includes people who identify with a multitude of different gender identities. If there is one thing I know today, it is that my vulva is phenomenal and I wouldn't want her any other way."¹⁰

"I say grab a mirror and play along. Get in there. Learn about it."¹¹



Cameron Diaz
(actor)



Janelle Monae
(singer, songwriter
and rapper)

"I don't believe that all women need to possess a vagina to be a woman. I have one I'm proud of it, but there's a lot of policing and controlling that people are trying to have over our vaginas."¹²

"I think trans women, and trans people in general, show everyone that you can define what it means to be a man or woman on your own terms."¹³



Laverne Cox
(actor and LGBTQ
advocate)



**V - Formerly Eve
Ensler (The Vagina
Monologues)**

"I was worried about my own vagina. It needed a context of other vaginas... a community, a culture of vaginas. There's so much darkness and secrecy surrounding them... like the Bermuda Triangle."¹⁴

"Where does the taboo around the vulva come from? Has it always looked the same throughout history? How does the taboo around the vulva affect us women psychologically... these things were very interesting for me. I wanted to investigate why there is so much shame surrounding women's bodies—and in particular the genital parts—in order to change it."¹⁵

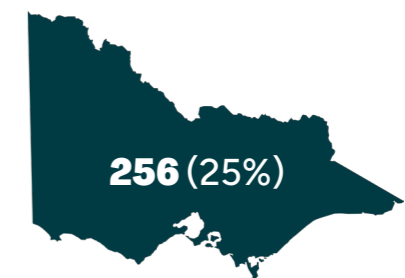
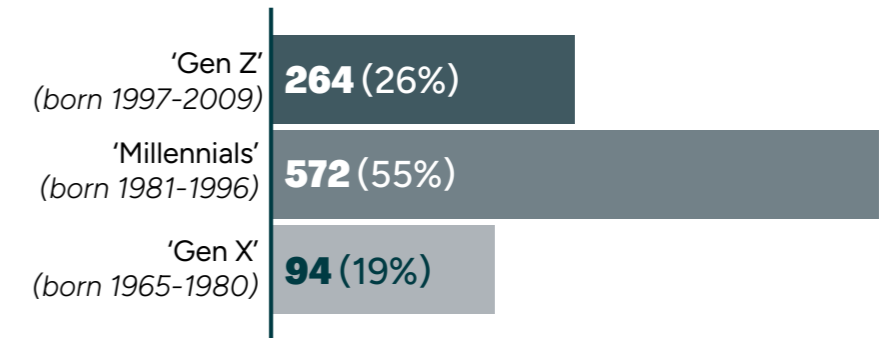


Liv Stromquist
(artist, author and
radio presenter)

Methodology

In April 2024, Women’s Health Victoria (WHV) commissioned YouGov to collect data from a nationally representative sample of Australian women and people with labia on their attitudes towards the appearance of their labia. WHV designed the survey with our internal policy, advocacy and health experts. This report is part of a wider campaign associated with WHV’s 2024 update of The Labia Library, and builds on WHV’s previous research into the causes and consequences of labia shame and anxiety.¹⁶ The survey was conducted online from 10–15 April 2024, and included a mix of closed and open-ended questions on respondents’ feelings towards the appearance of their labia, their education on labia and vulvas, where they source information on labia, how their perception of their labia impacts their sex life, mental health, and physical/medical health, whether labia shame or anxiety had caused them to put off a GP visit or pap smear, whether they had given birth vaginally and if this had impacted their views around their labia, and whether they had ever considered labiaplasty.

A total of 1,030 women and people with labia aged 18–50 in Australia completed the questionnaire, including:




who were from Victoria




620 (67%)
from capital cities




340 (33%)
from regional areas




509 (49%)
who had children



291 (28%)
who said they came from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background



139 (13.5%)
who identified as LGBTQI+



16 (1.6%)
people who identified as transgender (10 who had undergone gender affirming surgery and six taking testosterone).

NB: The theoretical margin of error on a sample of this size is 3.1 percentage points. Due to rounding, totals for results may not add to 100.

Key findings

Previous research has found:

More than half (56%) of all people with vulvas have visible, or protruding labia minora, and many have labia that are asymmetrical.¹⁷



Labiaplasty is on the rise globally

from 2015 to 2019, labiaplasty procedures increased by 73%.¹⁸

Over a third of GP's in Australia said they had consulted with patients under 18 for labiaplasty.¹⁹

Nearly **19,000**

labiaplasty procedures were performed in the US in 2021, up 36% from 2020, according to the Aesthetic Plastic Surgery National Databank.²⁰

Prior to that, requests for labiaplasty increased by more than 217% from 2012 to 2017, according to the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons.²¹

Our new findings:

Of the 1,030 Australians and people with labia who responded to the YouGov 2024 survey:

More than one in 10 (13%) said they have felt embarrassed or unwilling to have sex due to the appearance of their labia, and around the same number said the appearance of their labia had negatively impacted their mental health.

Approximately

1 in 8

(the equivalent of 680,000)

people said they have put off a visit to their GP for sexual and reproductive concerns or a pap smear, because they are embarrassed about the look of their labia. One in 20 people have done this more than once.

Two in five respondents Australian women (43%) said that if they were concerned about the appearance of their labia, they would be uncomfortable discussing this with their GP.



2 in 3
respondents

(65%, the equivalent of approximately 350,000)

who said they had considered labiaplasty said this was because they believe their labia is different to others.

Over a third (35%) of Australians with labia said they feel happy and confident with their labia.

A previous evaluation of the Labia Library found:

The Labia Library plays a crucial role in fostering this confidence: 91% of Labia Library users say it has increased their knowledge of genital diversity!²²



One in 10 respondents had considered *labiaplasty*

(equivalent to 549,000 people)

Almost a third (31%) of Gen Z people with labia surveyed associated their labia with negative words such as

weird
disgusting
ugly

Almost half of those who said they were considering labiaplasty said their decision was influenced by what they had seen in *mainstream porn and social media*

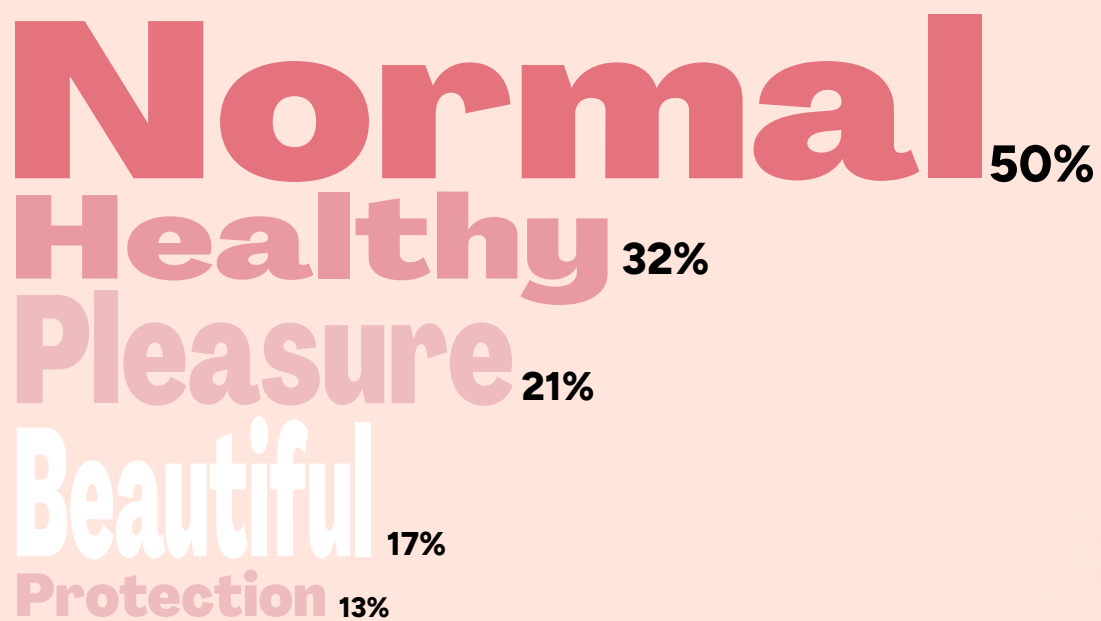
Labia shame is heightened for

Gen Z

Around one in four (23%) people aged 18-24 said they feel *anxious, ashamed or embarrassed* by how their labia looks.

Labia pride

Over a third (35%) of respondents told us they feel happy and confident about the appearance of their labia. When asked what words they most associated with their labia, almost two thirds (63%) recorded positive words with their labia (respondents could select more than one word).



Interestingly, the older that women and people with labia were when they took the survey, the more likely they were to be unfazed by its appearance: More than half (55%) of Gen X people we spoke expressed they were unbothered, compared to 49% of Millennials and 45% of Gen Z.

Just over one in 10 (13%) of Gen Xs said they felt anxious or embarrassed by the look of their labia, compared to almost one quarter (23%) of people aged 18-24.

The survey results also suggest that Gen X women were more comfortable with their labia looking "different" and more comfortable to talk openly to a GP or medical professional about their labia, compared to Gen Zs. They were also far less likely to access information on their labia from porn (7%) compared to Gen Zs (19%).

"I feel like as an adult I've accepted that they come in many shapes and sizes. Mine is not abnormal," one respondent answered in the survey.

Childbirth also appears to have a positive influence on labia acceptance, with three in 10 respondents who had given birth vaginally saying that this experience positively impacted how they feel about their vulva and labia appearance.

"[I said I feel confident about my labia because] I'm older and have had two children; 18-year-old me would probably not respond the same way," said one respondent.

Some of the comments people made included:

"It can give me pleasure"

"I'm a nurse and during the course of my 18 year career, it's become very apparent to me that whilst we all have similar anatomy, everyone is slightly different"

"It functions well"



"They're like fingerprints. No two are the same, though they may be somewhat similar. I don't care to waste time worrying about the appearance of my genitals. I identify as a lesbian, so I do truly believe all forms of the vagina and its extremities are beautiful."

"I think that it is a nice shape"

"It's just not something I really think or worry about"

"It is a functioning piece of my body that I was born with that serves a purpose. That purpose is not a cosmetic one. It's not visible to anyone else and causes me no discomfort or health issues."

"It gives me more sexual pleasure"

"Every labia, regardless of how it looks, is normal. I feel like our perception of how labia is supposed to look like is due to labia that is seen in porn."

"I feel like as an adult I've accepted that they come in many shapes and sizes. Mine is not abnormal."

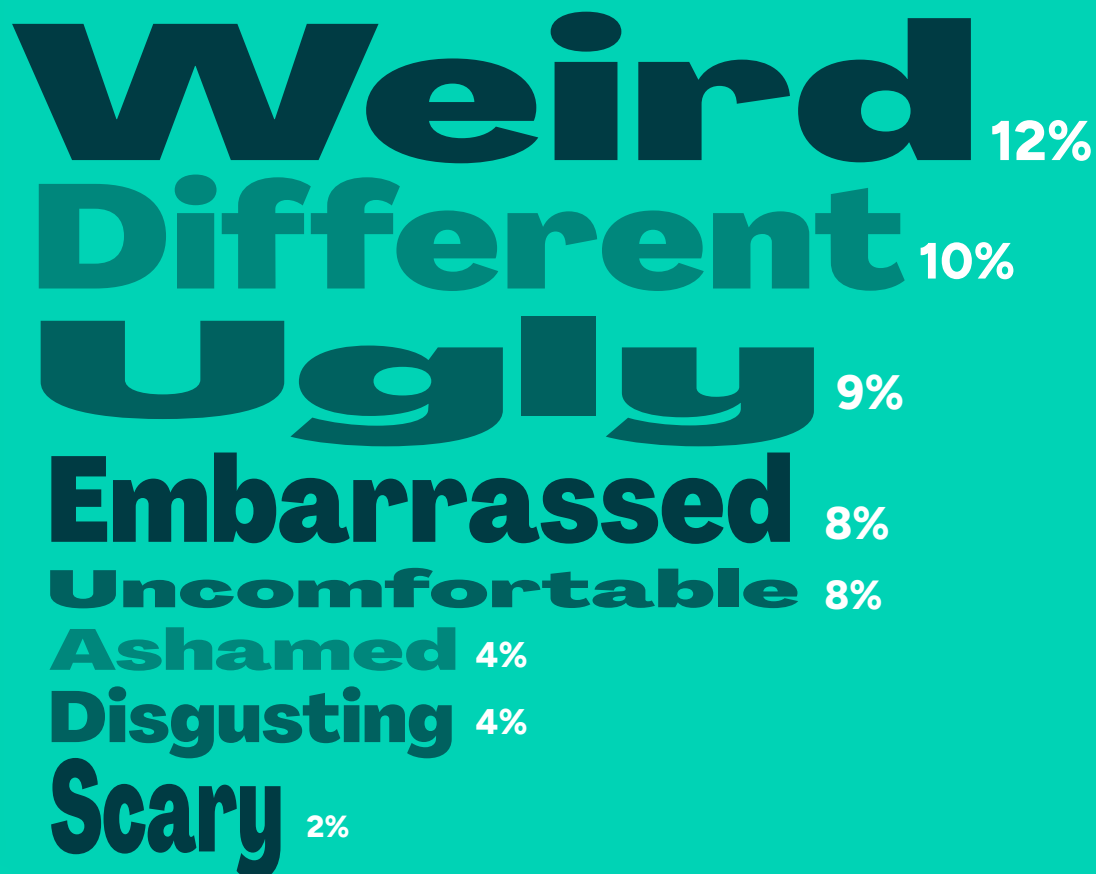
"Receiving validation from sexual partners went a long way towards my confidence"

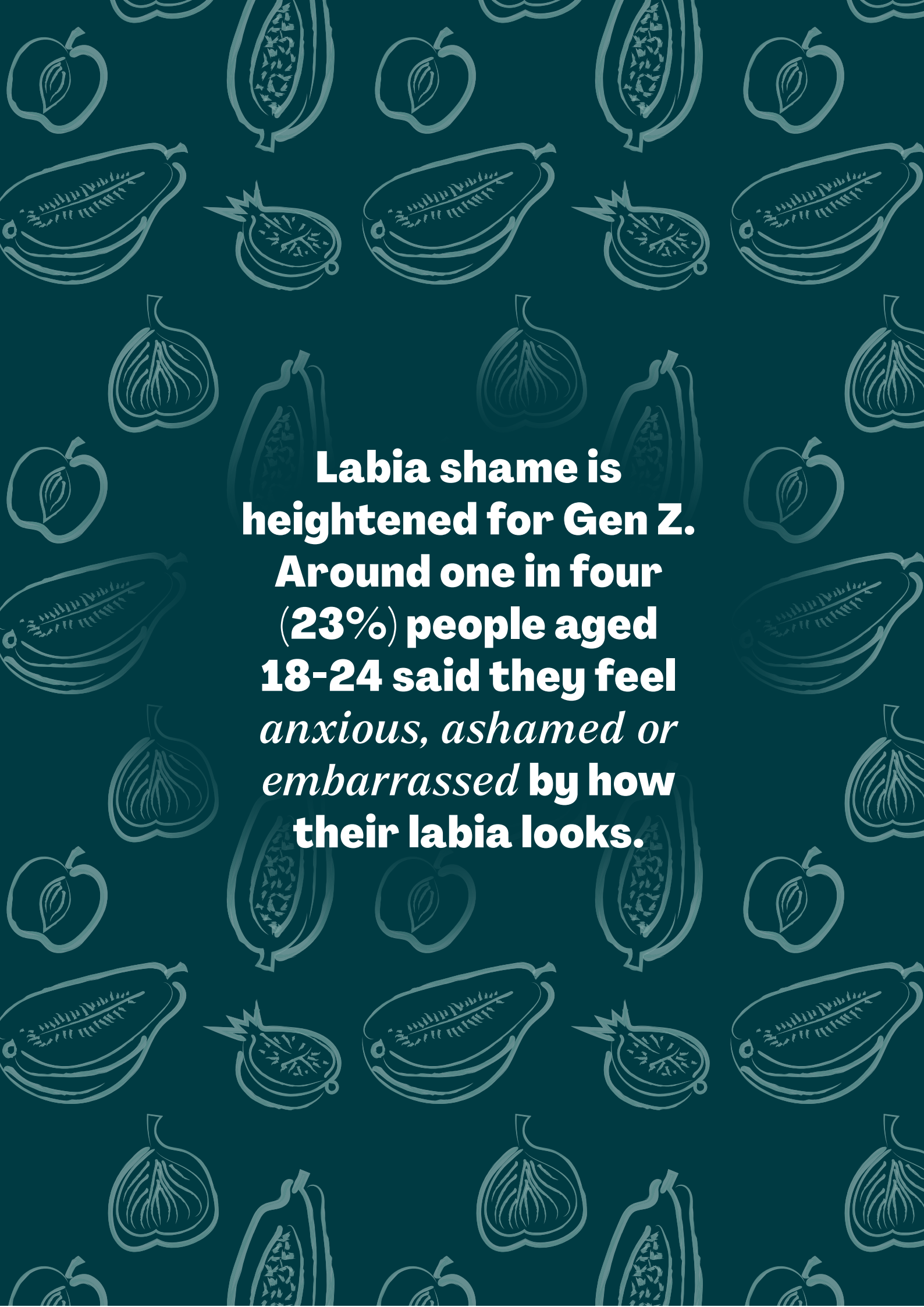
"I used to be incredibly embarrassed for a long time growing up, to the extent I researched the cost of a labiaplasty. Since becoming an exotic dancer and online model, I have since found confidence in myself as I have been exposed to many, many real bodies all with variety and uniqueness - and I have realised my body is perfectly normal and beautiful!"



The key drivers of labia shame and anxiety

When asked to complete a word association activity on labia perceptions, one quarter of respondents we spoke to associate this body part with negative words.





**Labia shame is
heightened for Gen Z.
Around one in four
(23%) people aged
18-24 said they feel
*anxious, ashamed or
embarrassed by how
their labia looks.***

Responses to survey questions about where people obtained information about labia from highlighted four main drivers of labia shame and anxiety:

1. *Widespread online pornography and social media*



We are influenced enormously by the world we live in and the media we consume, and with the majority of us living our lives increasingly online, there is evidence that a significant proportion of people – particularly younger people - are obtaining information on what 'normal' labia look like from porn and social media, including cosmetic surgery advertising. Usually airbrushed and filtered, and some even altered surgically – these idealised depictions are hardly realistic.

One in five (18%) of Gen Zs obtain their information on what labia 'should look like' from porn. Almost a third (30%) said they obtained it from social media.

Our survey found that almost one in five (18%) of Gen Zs obtain their information on what labia 'should look like' from porn. Almost a third (30%) said they obtained it from social media.

The way people look in pornography has a huge impact on people with labia, as the limited diversity of performers' labia and vulvas can cause people to become concerned about how their labia look; they may worry that their vulvas and labia don't look right or are abnormal or misshapen; and may feel ashamed, embarrassed and awkward.

What's more, the sexual objectification of women's genitalia – treating their genitals as an object to be owned or consumed – evident in most porn can have a damaging impact on sexual partners, particularly men. Their expectations of what vulvas and labia look like might be influenced by what they have seen in porn.

Research has also demonstrated that exposure to pornography is widespread among adolescents and young adults. A recent survey found 69% of young Australian women aged 15-20 had seen porn, whether intentionally or by chance.²³ As a result, adolescents may regard the norms presented in mainstream pornography as creating expectations for female bodily appearance.²⁴

Delivering and promoting health literacy resources, such as the Labia Library, to adolescents and children, via relationships and sexuality education curriculum in schools can help equip young people with factual information before they are exposed to unrealistic and damaging depictions that are common in porn.

Monash University's Gemma Sharp led a team in designing a two-minute, age-appropriate animated video discussing genital anatomical features and their function, as well as the diversity of vulva and labia, challenging the airbrushed ideal of genital appearance. When the video was tested with a sample of 343 16-18-year-olds, the team found it improved the accuracy of girls' genital anatomy knowledge from around 75% to almost 100% on average.²⁵

As one of our survey respondents commented, "With the, in my opinion, worrying rise in young people seeing pornography, this accurate information is more important than ever. Can you get this into schools? I fear boys are shocked/frightened when they first come across a 'real' labia and girls are fearful that theirs is somehow the 'wrong' shape/size."

2. *The mainstream media*

Whether in women's magazines, TV shows, film, art or advertisements, the relative lack of available realistic images of female genitalia for comparison has been suggested as a potential reason for women's increasing demand for labiaplasty. Some of these images may have been digitally modified or show labia that have been altered via labiaplasty, however, it is often hard for people to know if the labia they see have been changed, either physically or digitally.

Historically, censorship laws within Australia have also contributed to this standard or ideal of what a vulva and labia 'should look like'. According to the Australian Classification Board guidelines, vulva depictions must be restricted to 'discreet genital detail' but no 'genital emphasis',²⁶ which makes it difficult to include representations of protruding labia minora - despite the majority of women having these!

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are no media guidelines around what kinds of penises can be depicted.

Censorship across social media platforms also exacerbates the issue. The Vagina Museum shut down its Tik Tok account due to its education content on vulvas being continuously monitored and taken down by the platform, while Instagram banned a post of an educational vulva illustration by the period care brand Callaly in collaboration with The Vagina Museum.²⁷

Sex toy contests fuels labia shame

In 2015, a sex toy manufacturer sparked outrage when it announced a worldwide competition to find the 'world's most beautiful vagina'. As journalist Nicolas DiDomizio noted²⁸, this publicity stunt – which worked, going viral across international news sites and social media – merely doubled down on a long tradition of mass media and popular culture propagating unrealistic and damaging beauty standards for women. Media stunts such as this only fuel insecurity and shame about a normal, diverse body part and, sometimes, push women to alter their genitals to a so-called desirable aesthetic standard. "Determining what the 'best' vagina is ... especially based on appearance, doubles down on the already pervasive judgment of women's bodies by men," he said. "Because the world wants us to remember to be self-conscious about everything forever, there has now been a winner of the first ever 'World's Most Beautiful Vagina' contest."





3. Lack of education and awareness

Almost all GPs in Australia say they have encountered patient queries regarding genital normality.²⁹

But where do most people actually get their information on vulvas and labia from? Encouragingly, nearly one in two (47%) women and people with labia told us they obtain information about their labia through health information websites and just under a quarter (23%) say they access this information via their GP.

More than one in five (21%) people we spoke to said they obtained information on vulvas and labia through school or university. Yet Australians, especially adolescents, often have limited access to accurate information in schools about the anatomy and diversity of vulvas. Teenagers who are not exposed to realistic images of vulvas may become more self-conscious, and compare their own bodies to unrealistic and idealized images, believing their own labia are 'not normal'. Boys also consume these images, which drive unrealistic ideas for them about what labia 'should look like'.

Feeling unsure or concerned about labia appearance is common.



The anatomy of the vulva and labia continually changes throughout adolescence and early adulthood, with the labia minora often becoming more visible in appearance during puberty. In the UK, girls as young as 9 are reported to have sought female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) because they were distressed by the appearance of their vulvas or labia.³⁰

In Australia, recent evidence suggests that parents would support more inclusive genital body image education being introduced to school-based relationships and sexuality education (RSE). Melbourne-based academic Gemma Sharp and colleagues surveyed 125 Australian parents about whether they would consent to their 13- to 15-year-old sons and daughters participating in genital body image education.³¹ More than 80 per cent said they "definitely would" consent, and no parents said that they "definitely would not".

4. Childbirth

After giving birth to a baby, especially vaginally, the labia often undergo physical changes and in some cases tearing. A labial tear can include the labia minora or majora or the clitoral hood. While they occur commonly during vaginal birth, they are not talked about as often as other types of vaginal tears – commonly referred to by health practitioners as ‘grazing’, or a ‘first-degree tear’. Traumatic birth injuries and subsequent changes in the appearance of their vulva can lead to spiralling insecurity amongst some people, who sometimes say they no longer think about their genitals in the same way. Some are driven to seek out labiaplasty.

Almost half (441) of the people we surveyed said they had given birth vaginally. Interestingly, three in 10 said that this experience positively impacted how they feel about their vulva and labia appearance. Women who speak languages other than English were more likely to say that the experience positively impacted how they felt about their vulva/labia (38%) compared to those who speak English only (26%).

In contrast, nearly one in five (18%) - a significant minority – said that childbirth had a negative effect on how they feel about their labia.

Those who told us that they feel unhappy, embarrassed or anxious about the appearance of their labia, were far more likely to say that the experience of vaginal childbirth impacted them negatively (56%) compared to those who say they are happy and confident (8%) or not bothered about the appearance of their labia (13%).

The range of feelings people had about their labia after vaginal childbirth are reflected in these comments:

“I feel after having children it stretched and looks disgusting now.”

“I’ve had no issues with my labia... it’s healthy, [it has helped me birth] three children”

“[I said I feel confident about my labia because] I’m older and have had two children. 18 year old me would probably not respond the same way.”

*Nearly one in five (18%)
- a significant minority -
said that childbirth had
a negative effect on how
they feel about their labia.*

Unpacking the *impacts* of labia shame

Labia shame can have significant impacts on people's mental health and wellbeing; their sexual and reproductive health, their relationships and their sex lives. It's also one of the leading drivers of labiaplasty.

In fact, in Australia, one in six people (16%) we surveyed with labia are anxious or embarrassed about the way theirs look. Worryingly, this is heightened for Gen Z, with around one in four (23%) of people aged 18-24 saying they feel anxious, ashamed or embarrassed by how their labia looks, and almost a third (31%) associating their labia with negative words such as 'weird', 'disgusting' or 'ugly'.

Some of the comments people shared included:

"I don't allow oral sex or for my labia to be closely viewed."

"I think I've felt a little embarrassed the first time with someone and often prefer to keep the lights off."

"Mostly big lips are associated with being 'a whore' - someone that has an excessive amount of sex therefore stretching out the lips. I was unfortunately just born that way and mislabeled."

"I am very embarrassed to have sex because my labia is very unattractive. Because of this I often avoid having sex and do not seek out relationships with other people."

"I always feel self-conscious and embarrassed with any new sexual partner that he will find my labia disgusting."

This shame and stigma can have long-lasting and negative impacts on people's mental and physical health, and their relationships. More than four in 10 (43%) of people who were anxious or embarrassed by their labia told us they had put off seeing a GP for sexual and reproductive health issues or a pap smear because of this shame; almost 6 in 10 (57%) said it had impacted their mental health and more than 6 in 10 (62%) said they had put off having sex as a result.

One in 10 respondents aged between 18 and 50 told us that they have considered labiaplasty. Extrapolated to the Australian population, that's approximately 549,000 people.



What is labiaplasty?

Female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) refers to any procedure that aims to change aesthetic or functional aspects of a vulva. Labiaplasty is the most common form of female genital cosmetic surgery and involves the alteration of the labia minora and/or labia majora, in order to change their size or shape.

Labiaplasty doesn't change the shape of the vagina, which is an interior, elastic, muscular tube that leads from the vaginal opening to the uterus. It is typically performed under local anaesthetic.

The procedure was first described in 1976, and the first operations were undertaken in the mid-1980s. Although no surgery is undertaken on the actual vagina, the term 'designer vagina' emerged in the popular vernacular to describe these procedures in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

In Australia and internationally, researchers have documented a significant and accelerating increase in FGCS since the early 2000s. Demand is thought to be mostly cosmetically, rather than medically, motivated.

Currently, there is not enough evidence to show that female genital cosmetic procedures are safe or that they are effective at improving body image, sexual satisfaction or self-esteem. These procedures also have significant risks, including:

Scarring

Numbness

Pain

Discoloration
of labia

Some online cosmetic surgery advertisements make claims which suggest that labiaplasty improves hygiene and that longer labia increase the risk of vaginal or urinary infections. This is not supported by evidence.

Of real concern is the growing number of young people requesting this surgery. *A 2016 study of Australian GPs found that over a third of GPs surveyed had consulted with patients aged under 18 years for FGCS.*³² Performing labiaplasty on children younger than 18 years old is strongly discouraged, as they are more likely to experience complications due to the ongoing development of the labia throughout puberty.

10%

of participants in our survey said they had *considered labiaplasty*

46%

of these said this was because they wanted their labia to look more like what they have seen in the media

(including social media, pornography and mainstream media)

35%

said it was because they felt their labia didn't look

similar to other people's they had seen

In Australia, there is no longer any Medicare data on labiaplasty procedures without medical indication, making it difficult to measure the true number of procedures since data became unavailable in 2013. But we can look to other countries for comparison. In the US, nearly 19,000 labiaplasty procedures were performed in 2021, up 36% from 2020, according to the Aesthetic Plastic Surgery National Databank. Prior to that, requests for labiaplasty increased by more than 217% from 2012 to 2017, according to the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons.

22%

said it was because their labia caused them *pain or discomfort*

“We do know that some women and others with vulvas are influenced by media images of smaller labia. And in some ways this is a vicious cycle. It can be considered ‘obscene’ in some countries to see labia hanging down and, as a result, companies may choose actresses with smaller labia or may digitally alter labia, so that they can sell their photographs or pornographic videos in more markets. Unfortunately, that creates a false impression that labia tend to be small and that’s not true; labia come in all sorts of shapes, sizes and colours.”

Debby Herbenick,
professor at the Indiana University School of Public Health³³

Some of the comments people shared on why they have considered labiaplasty included:

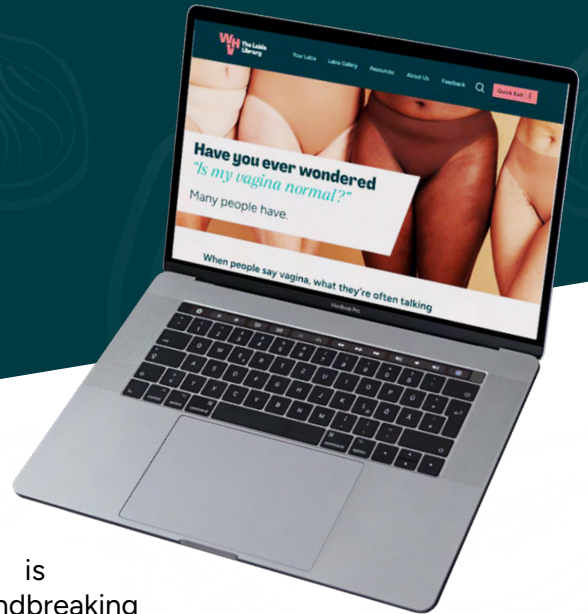
"My waxing lady said you should [look into] that kind of surgery"

"My ex-partner made some comments"

"An ex, big flaps"

The Labia Library

Since launching in 2013, the Labia Library has been visited by 11 million people worldwide for real health information, for every body.



This year, Women's Health Victoria (WHV) is celebrating 10 years of the [Labia Library](#) – a groundbreaking online health resource in Australia and across the world – and its phenomenal success. Launched in response to increasing demand for female genital cosmetic surgery (also known as labiaplasty), the Labia Library provides important information about and a gallery displaying the diversity of vulvas and labia to promote positive body image. It averages around 1 million unique visits per year. To mark this important milestone, WHV have updated and re-launched the website to bring it up to date with current health evidence and advice, and to increase the diversity of images in its gallery.

The new Labia Library includes health information and advice for health practitioners, parents and health educators (in and outside of school settings), further strengthening its existing reputation as a trusted and internationally recommended resource. The resource was produced in consultation with cis women, transgender and gender diverse people and a range of professionals working in women's health, including gynaecologists, psychosexual health specialists, sex educators and general practitioners.

The centrepiece of the Labia Library is its photo gallery, which now includes 104 unaltered images of vulvas and labia. The models are aged between 18 and 80 years, and include people who have given birth vaginally (some with birth-related injuries or surgeries), pregnant people, people with stomach folds and thighs that meet, people of colour, trans women who have undergone gender affirming surgery, people with labia who are taking testosterone, and people who are post-menopause.

The photos are completely anonymous (no faces are shown) and the photoshoot was conducted in a safe and supportive environment. Participants said they were excited to participate for a range of reasons: some because

they wanted to be involved in a campaign of education and destigmatisation; some because they saw modelling for the Labia Library as an act of self-love and empowerment; and others because they wanted to repair their own relationships with their bodies. Some said they participated for all three reasons.

In 2015, the Labia Library won the Victorian Public Healthcare Gold Award for Excellence in Women's Health. It provides a compelling example of how a simple and relatively inexpensive online public health initiative can make a big impact. The Labia Library is also a recommended resource within the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery Resource for General Practitioners and other health professionals.³⁴

"Thank you for taking my worst insecurity and making me feel normal."

Platforms that provide diverse and realistic representations of the body (in the case of the Labia Library, its unaltered photographs) can be powerful counterweights to dominant norms and discourses. This is evidenced through the reach and usage of the Labia Library. The Labia Library enables dominant genital norms to be critically discussed and challenged.

In 2015, to learn more about the effectiveness of the Labia Library in improving women's health literacy, WHV undertook a thematic analysis of almost 3000 free text responses to a user survey hosted on the site between 2013 and 2015.³⁵ The vast majority of survey respondents indicated a positive perception of the resource, often experiencing a significant reduction in anxiety, and feeling reassured about the 'normality' of the appearance of their labia.

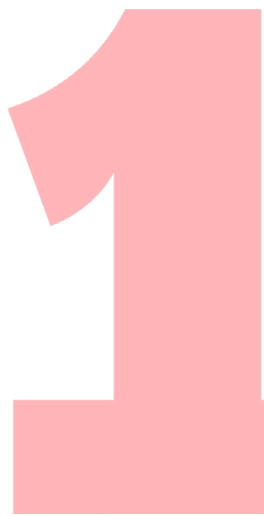
The capacity of the Labia Library to foster feelings of normality, provide information, lessen anxiety and increase self-confidence has been continuously highlighted by users over the years. Despite having been designed with young women in mind initially, the Labia Library has proven to have a much wider reach and impact.

A deceptively simple intervention, this game-changing health resource has demonstrated the ongoing demand for and value of accessible and candid health literacy and positive body image resources for women and girls (cis and trans) and gender diverse people.

"Thank you!! I wanted to cry because I am so relieved. I felt like I had no clue if I looked normal and was worried and this helped put things into perspective for me and gave me more appreciation for my body. I am very glad to have found this."

Recommendations

'No edits. No filters. Just labia'



Better education for GPs

Women's Health Victoria is calling for better education of GPs and doctors about labial diversity. Nearly one in two (47%) women and people with labia told us they obtain information about their labia through health information websites and just under a quarter (23%) say they access this information via their GP.

Yet vulva and labia diversity is not covered in GP training, and medical texts that GPs and other health professionals use in training show a single stereotypical representation of a vulva with labia minora that do not protrude beyond the labia majora.³⁶ With a better understanding of the diversity of vulval anatomy, GPs will be better equipped to support patients with anxiety about the appearance of their vulva, including referral to mental health support as needed.

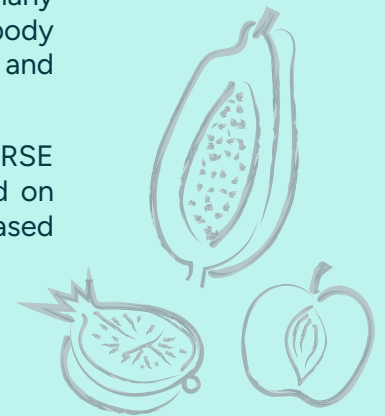
We call on medical education bodies such as the RACGP and university medical schools to review education materials on vulva anatomy to show greater diversity.

Integration of education about vulval diversity into relationships and sexuality education (RSE)

In order to have a positive impact on how people with labia feel about the appearance of their labia, they must be reached with trustworthy, factual information when they are adolescents. This will be beneficial to people of all sexes and genders.

Starting sexual health education in younger age groups has also been shown to be conducive to the development of healthy sexual behaviours. However, many sexual education programs do not address broader topics such as genital body image and sexual self-concept, and instead focus on reproductive anatomy and health issues.³⁷

Women's Health Victoria calls on state education departments to review RSE curricula to ensure that vulva diversity is included in components focused on puberty, body image and sexual relationships, drawing on evidence-based resources such as the Labia Library.



Faster progress on regulation of young people's access to online pornography

Labial diversity is not reflected in online pornography, one of the most influential sources of (mis)information on sex and body image for young people in Australia today. The Australian government recently announced a suite of measures including regulation, classification standards and legislation, that together aim to prevent easy access to porn for children and young people and to counteract the damage caused by exposure. These measures form part of a national campaign to address gender-based violence.

While WHV applauds this initiative, we also urge the government to recognise the harms to mental health and body image that stem from unrealistic depictions of vulvas and labia that proliferate in online pornography, and that provide further urgency to the need for regulation of access. We further recommend that inclusion of realistic depictions and discussions of bodies and genitalia – in particular, of vulvas and labia – be incorporated into public health campaigns.





Conclusion

Eradicating labia shame and insecurity, with all people with labia comfortable and confident in their diversity – will require unlearning deeply ingrained societal norms and stigmas, and it won't happen instantly. But deceptively simple interventions such as the Labia Library demonstrate the ongoing demand for accessible and candid health literacy and positive body image resources for women and girls (cis and trans) and gender diverse people, and the life-changing impact these resources can have.

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The Labia Library



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