



The Hot Seat

Zoe Donaldson steams her vagina.

S O IT'S COME to this: Naked except for a sports bra and a swaddle of blankets, I straddle a wooden stool with a hole cut out of its middle in a dimly lit massage room while a woman pushes a bowl of hot water and herbs directly beneath my hoo-ha.

I know what you're thinking: *Haven't you ever seen a horror movie before? Run!* But I got here willingly. A sufferer of immobilizing menstrual cramps (imagine wearing a belt of medieval torture devices), I'd reached a breaking point. Pain relievers and heating pads had become child's play, so I explored another route: vaginal steaming.

Despite what fans like Gwyneth Paltrow report, steaming is less about "cleaning" your vagina and more about treating myriad symptoms—pain, irritation, dryness—and promoting uterine health, according to advocates. How? By warming your pelvic area, thereby increasing blood flow. "We want to get things moving," says Nicole Kruck, a massage therapist who focuses on women's health at the YinOva Center in New York City. What was the worst that could happen—scorched lady parts? (Actually, that sounded bad, so I talked to Raquel

Dardik, MD, an ob-gyn at New York University's Joan H. Tisch Center for Women's Health: "There is no physiological reason why it would treat your symptoms, but as long as you don't put steam *inside* your vagina, or burn anything, there isn't much of a downside.")

My session with Kruck began with a short Arvigo Maya abdominal treatment. She started at my diaphragm as I lay flat, swept her hands toward my navel, and moved them like a rolling pin over my doughy stomach. Next came a do-si-do around my belly button before she began searching—externally—for my uterus, which evidently "hangs low and to the right." (Who knew?) Then it was time for the main event. I stripped off my underwear and "tented" my bottom half. Kruck filled a bowl with a brew of basil, calendula, and mugwort she'd chosen for my condition, then slid it beneath me. I felt waves of warmth around my vagina—no punishing broil, just a gentle stream of humid air. For the next 20 minutes, I was truly relaxed. I even felt a little sexy, aware of how my supersecret garden fit into the grand scheme of my body.

At Kruck's suggestion, I kept steaming in the week leading up to my period. Every other night I boiled a pot of water, added my herbs, and poured the concoction into a metal mixing bowl. Then I placed the bowl inside my (very clean) toilet and sat down. When my monthly flow finally started flowing, it was without fanfare—three hours of discomfort versus 48 of writhing. I popped a few ibuprofen, but went pill-free the following day—a feat I hadn't achieved in at least a decade.

I've had about 180 periods in my life, and every one of them has felt apocalyptic. Will steaming tame them? Not sure. Are the benefits all in my head? Maybe. But knowing that a little heat can go a long way lets me feel powerful—and ready to move forward, full steam ahead.