Traditional genital hygiene practices in Turkey

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This descriptive study is planned to find frequency of traditional genital practices which affecting women’s reproductive health. Research took place in İstanbul, a largest city located in the West of Turkey. A total of 178 women participated in the study. All of the subjects were asked about the use of frequency and reason for traditional genital practices. The findings of the study showed that traditional genital practices which affect reproductive health are prevalent. In our country, traditionally learned health information, behaviors and beliefs have an adverse effect on women health and need to be changed and corrected. Nurses should know the religious and traditional practices and culture of the society for which they provide care, so that their efforts to protect and improve women’s health will be effective.

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Traditional genital practices have been widely used in many parts of the world1-12. Brown et al. traditional intravaginal practices have been described in 11 countries of sub - Saharan Africa, and also in Qatar, Indonesia, Thailand, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the United States1. Hygiene practices involve external washing and intravaginal cleansing or douching and application of substances. Motivations generally relate to personal hygiene, genital health or sexuality1. About half of African-American women and one quarter of white women douche3. Studies in the USA showed that about 37% of US women reported regular vaginal douching4.

National data about the traditional genital practices revealing Turkey’s general status are insufficient. The studies which show religious and traditional attitudes and behaviors were widespread in Turkey13-26. The studies carried out in Turkey were indicated frequently performed in several traditional genital hygienic applications. This practice includes vaginal douching, use of unhygienic material as a vaginal tampons and manually cleaning of the genital area13-26.

Vaginal douching is defined as a practice of washing the vagina with water and/or other solutions. This is widely applied for personal hygiene, aesthetics, traditional/religious necessities, preventing pregnancy and reducing some complaints (discharge, itching) among women in many countries11,27. In some Asian countries such as India, genital practices have been reported to be used as traditional folk medicine applications7.

There are many studies that show negative effects of vaginal douche over health. This application, which has no known/ determined positive contribution to health but changes the chemical constitution of vagina, disturbs normal vaginal flora; moreover, it was discussed and reported by some studies as a risk factor for ectopic pregnancy, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) and pathologies like cervical cancer3,4,8-11.

Vaginal douche causes many health problems due to the transfer of patogen microorganisms through bottom up. Vaginal douching may reduce fecundity by increasing susceptibility to infection. Also douching has been associated with ectopic pregnancy. A positive relation between the frequency of douching and cervical cancer risk was found in some studies11. Some studies showed that vaginal practices are also widespread in the countries where HIV and STDs are prevalent8,10-12.

Women perform vaginal douche generally before or after the intercourse, after the period for the prevention of bad smell, discharge, itchiness and rarely for the protection from pregnancy11. Women believe that vaginal douche provides genital hygiene. In addition to this, religion has a strong influence in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. In Islamic
countries including Turkey, women use vaginal douche also for religious reasons\(^\text{28,29}\).

The Islam religion acknowledges women dirty, whom having vaginal bleeding or had a sexual intercourse. So those women must take full ablation (an Islamic procedure called “gusul”) in order to pray, eat and drink or sustain human and social activities\(^\text{29}\). In countries such as ours where Islam is widespread, the gusul is a necessary application due to religious reasons (such as after intercourse or vaginal bleeding)\(^\text{29}\). According to Islam, taking water into the mouth and nose and wash the entire body with water so that there are no dry parts is adequate for gusul. In this way, women can be accepted in terms of cleanliness and purification by religion\(^\text{28,29}\).

The studies show that VD habit is more common among Muslim women\(^\text{13-26}\). Even though VD is not a part of gusul, most of the women perform VD as a ritual additionally\(^\text{29}\). This is because of women belief that they cannot be clean (in terms of religion) without VD.

Muslims pray five times each day. Islam attaches great importance to cleanliness. Before prayer ritual cleansing or washing the body (an Islamic procedure called ablution) are done\(^\text{29}\). According to Islam, in case blood or pus out of from any part of the body, ablution will be break down. Many women believe that it should not be a vaginal discharge during prayers and for that reasons close the entrance of their vagina with unhygienic agent such as cotton, paper napkin or cloth\(^\text{1,4,25,21,25}\). It is a controversial issue that the ablation is invalid because of normal vaginal discharge in terms of Islamic religion\(^\text{29}\). Therefore, many women want to avoid vaginal discharge during the pray and therefore closes the vaginal entry. It is known that vaginal tampons precipitate the growth of number of microorganisms and they increase the tendency of genital tract infections due to the irritation and the contamination during placing them into the vagina. It is evident that the risk of infection and contamination increases by the usage of non-hygienic materials such as cotton, paper napkin or cloth. It is evident that the risk of infection and contamination increases with the use of materials lacking of hygiene and having a tissue that could leave particles as a tampon\(^\text{11,21,25}\).

Manual cleaning method of genital area with water after using the bathroom is a wide traditional behavior in Turkey. This application must be made from vagina through the anus in order to does not cause genital infection. Nevertheless this practice, which is wrongly performed starting from anus to the vagina and the urethra, increases the risk of genital and urinary tract infections\(^\text{14,16,20,21,25}\). Health education is one of the most important components of preventive health services. There are a lot of studies about the positive effects of health education in the literature\(^\text{30,32}\). Women health services which must be considered in basic health services, gives not only medical care to every women about their problems but also they are good opportunities for educating them regarding behavior patterns of protecting and improving health status.

Professionals who work in the women healthcare must be widen and reconstructed the presentation of services that include preventive health services in this context.

**Methods**

**Design**

This descriptive study was planned to find out the frequency of traditional and religious genital hygiene practices which is affecting women’s reproductive health.

**Sample**

The current study was a cross sectional observational study conducted in Women and Child Health Hospital in Istanbul. Participants for this study were selected from patients who visited the obstetrics and gynecology outpatient clinics of hospital during the period from December 2009 to February 2010. The sample cases which accept to join this study, carry the criteria of being married (still or before). The affirmation for this study has been given by the ethics committee of the hospital.

**Instrument**

For data collection, a “Case Diagnosis Form” is used which was developed by the observer with the help of literature and clinical experiences. The form is consisted of two parts; the first part involves socio-demographic characteristics. The second part includes the questions for determining the behaviors about the genital hygiene applications. The case diagnosis form was filled in by researcher with the face to face method in a separate room and in at least 15 min period of time per case.

**Data analysis**

The data were evaluated with descriptive statistics by using SPSS 11.5 software.
Results

As the socio-demographic features affect the women health behaviors directly, they are discussed briefly in this article. The study showed that the age range of cases are between 20-60, 18% of them had no education; and among the ones who has an educational background, 51.7% had only obligatory education, only 27.5% of cases had a business life (still working and retired ones also counted). It was demonstrated that 29.5% of cases had their first sexual intercourse under the age of 18 (mean 19.6) and 25.2% of cases had their first deliver under the age of 18 (mean: 21, 29). It is found that 48.2% of women who have active sexual life (or used to have) had birth control by traditional methods (coitus interruptus, vaginal douching, lactation, etc.) (Fig.1).

When women’s genital hygiene behaviors are examined, it is found that the percentage of the ones who perform traditional genital cleaning wrongly and from the anus to the vagina was 59 %, the ones who perform vaginal douching was 72.5 %, and the ones who block the vaginal entrance with some obstructive materials such as paper, fabric and cotton (because of the religious problems) was 21.9 % (Table 1).

Discussion

Female vaginal practices are different meanings around the world. In America and Europe, vaginal practices were often associated with either female purity and cleanliness (douching) or immorality (contraception, abortion, or treatment of sexually transmitted infections). In other parts of the world, including India, Turkey, and China, vaginal practices were associated in local cultural meaning

Choices of women about vaginal practices are affected from prior experience, cultural background, religious reasons and general approach to healthcare. Therefore, vaginal practices must be interpreted correctly. In order to understand the role and importance of vaginal applications in woman’s life need to understand cultural, traditional and religious effects in their lives.

The findings of the presented study support the literature on the fact of traditional and religious genital hygiene practices. The studies in Turkey show that VD is widely used, varying in between 55-80 %.

Sunay et al. reported in their study that 59.4% of women perform vaginal douche and was commonly performed after sexual intercourse (49.7 %) for religious reasons. Güzel et al. reported in their study that 91.6% of women conduct vaginal douche due to religious reasons. Karatay & Ozvars reported in their study that 72.1% of women perform vaginal douche after sexual intercourse. Shaaban et al. study conducted in Egypt showed that 88.9% and 80.6% of women performed VD due to religious reasons.

In present study, 72 % of cases stated that they are performing VD and 45.7 % of them stated that they
perform it mostly after the sexual intercourse. In countries such as ours where Islam people believe special shower after sex (an Islamic procedure called gusul). This is a necessary application due to religious reasons. According to Islam although VD is not a part of gusul, most of the women perform VD as a ritual additionally.

Genital hygienic cleansing after elimination which applies only with water and by hand, is common in our country. Wrong genital cleansing when combined with vaginal douching increased risk of urogenital system infections. Oskan et al. reported in their study that more than half of the women described false method of genital hygiene after elimination. Kisa & Taşkın reported in their study that a strong positive correlation between traditional genital cleaning and risk of vaginal infection. The risk of infection was 3.79 times higher among women who wiped perineum from back to front and 4.80 times high risk among women who mix washed perineum after defecation. Demirbag reported in her study that 45.5% of women close the entrance to the vagina with cloth. Oskan et al. reported in their study that 49.1% of women close the entrance to the vagina with cloth. It is evident that the risk of infection and contamination increases with the use of materials lacking of hygiene and having a tissue that could leave particles as a buffer.

Hilber et al. study conducted in two Asian and two African communities showed that woman appeared to engage in vaginal practice actively and purposefully. They reported in their study that women’s had put something inside or entrance of vagina (including herbs, sticks, stones, leaves, cotton, paper, etc.). In this study women were doing these practices completely traditional reasons for not religious reasons.

Studies have shown that traditional genital practices alters the vaginal flora and increases the risk of genital infections. The presented study when the cases are questioned in terms of abnormal vaginal discharge, the result showed that almost half of the cases (47.8%) have recurrent discharge. These findings can be associated with inadequate or false genital hygiene practices due to traditional/religious reasons obtained from the present study. As a result:

Genital practices are a significant issue in terms of being a preventable factor of the negative health results. Health related practices of people are affected by social and cultural characteristics of the society they live in. In Turkey, traditional behaviors and beliefs which adversely affecting the women’s health should be replaced with correct behavior patterns. One of the most important prerequisites for the improvement of women’s health is that nurses should know the religious practices and culture of the society for which they provide care, so that their efforts to protect and improve women’s health will be effective. Suggestions for the definition and possible solutions of the problem must be developed by performing more detailed and community based studies which reveal the effect of Islam religion on VD and other genital hygiene practices. Further research is needed on factors that influence women’s beliefs and genitally practices.

References


