

VAGINAL YEAST INFECTIONS

A problem that 75% of women experience at least once in their lives and often recurs.



The normal healthy vagina contains many bacteria the most common of which is Lactobacillus acidophilus. It's one of the "good" organisms and its presence helps keep other organisms like yeasts from overgrowing and causing symptoms of vaginal infections. By far the majority of these infections are caused by a yeast called Candida albicans. This organism is found in the mouth and intestinal tract but also resides in the vagina.

The causes of this Candida overgrowth include treatment with broad-spectrum antibiotics, variations in estrogen levels especially during pregnancy, hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or menopause. It is also associated with certain clinical conditions like diabetes, multiple sclerosis and HIV infection. Wearing clothing made of nylon or lycra that holds in heat and moisture can also cause it.

Symptoms of a vaginal yeast infection include burning, itching, redness and irritation of the vaginal and vulvar area. Some women may experience pain during urination or during sexual intercourse. There may be copious vaginal discharges, which are thicker and curd-like, usually with no offensive odour. If there was an odour, it could be a bacterial infection rather than a yeast infection.

General information about vaginal infections:

A healthy vagina produces a normal discharge comprised of secretions from cervical glands, the uterus, fallopian tubes and blood vessels in the vaginal walls. This discharge acts as a natural cleanser, flushing out debris while maintaining the proper balance of microorganisms.

Lactic acid is an important component of the vagina. This acid helps keep the pH of the vagina at an optimum acidic level of between 3.5 to 4.5. This acidic environment prevents many other bacteria and yeasts from growing in the vagina. One of the causes of vaginal infections in premenopausal women is lower level of estrogen, which causes the pH to rise to between 6 and 8 allowing other organisms to multiply and cause problems.

It is very important that women see their doctor when they have their first occurrence of a vaginal infection. Because these infections can have varying causes, it is important to determine the type of infection first. Besides a yeast infection, it could be bacterial vaginosis characterized by the overgrowth of certain bacteria in the vagina. A sexually transmitted disease (Chlamydia, Gonorrhea, Trichomonas) also has to be ruled out as a cause. Vaginal inflammation without infection could also be due to low estrogen levels. There are estrogen vaginal creams available to treat this situation.

A vaginal yeast infection is not considered to be a sexually transmitted disease. The disease can occur in all women even those who have no active sexual history. Vaginal yeast infections are treatable and being aware of some of the risk factors (see sidebar), frequency of infection can be reduced.

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REDUCING THE RISK OF VAGINAL INFECTIONS

- Don't douche. This practice upsets the normal population of bacteria in the vagina. It may even push an infection higher into the uterus.
- Don't use scented hygiene products or bubble bath soaps.
- During menstruation, change pads and tampons often.
- Try to use underclothing with natural fibres. Pantyhose should have a cotton crotch and don't wear underpants at night.
- Avoid hot tubs.
- When cleaning genital areas, always wipe from front to back. This will avoid transferring bacteria from the rectal area to the urethra and vagina. The risk of urinary tract infections is also reduced.
- When washing your clothes, use mild detergents without so-called enzyme action.
- Change out of exercise clothes or bathing suits soon after using.
- If your diet includes foods with high yeast or sugar content, reduce these. Eating foods like yogurt with active bacterial cultures may also be helpful. Although eating more yogurt hasn't been proven to add to the good bacteria in the vagina, some people say it helps reduce the frequency of the infection.
- If you have intercourse during an infection, have your partner use a condom to avoid reinfection.

IS IT A YEAST OR BACTERIAL INFECTION?

Bacterial Vaginal Infection: Will usually have an unpleasant odour. Discharges are usually milky, watery or grey. Itching may not always be present. See your doctor for confirmation. Treatment will require an antibacterial medication.

Yeast vaginal infections: Usually the discharge is thick and white with no odour. Itching and burning are common. If this is the first time you have had a vaginal infection, see your doctor. After you become familiar with the signs and symptoms, you can treat subsequent infections with OTC products available in the pharmacy.

TREATMENT

There are many effective treatments available to treat vaginal yeast infections. They come in the form of oral tablets, vaginal inserts and vaginal creams. Some may be bought "over-the-counter" without a prescription; others have to be prescribed. But whatever method of treatment is used, it is important to use the medication for the full length of time. As with any anti-infective therapy, stopping too soon may not eradicate the infection fully and it could return.

In "the olden days", treatment for vaginal yeast infections could last for up to two weeks. Over the past few years, newer and more efficient drugs have been found that shorten the duration of treatment to seven days, three days and even one day. Of course, with these advances come better compliance and better resolution of the problem.

First-line therapy for vaginal yeast infections includes drugs like clotrimazole (Canestin®), miconazole (Monistat®) and tioconazole (Gyne-Cure®), which are available without a prescription. Butoconazole (Gynazole-1®) is a prescription product. Some of these products are sold as vaginal creams and some are in the form of a vaginal insert and are usually sold in 1, 3 up to 7 day treatments. The vaginal cream formulation is generally more effective but some women prefer the inserts or suppositories for their convenience.

For recurrent vaginal yeast infections, defined as at least four episodes in a one-year period, a once weekly dose of fluconazole (Diflucan®) has shown good results. This is a prescription antifungal antibiotic and is used as a method of prevention.

SUMMARY:

Vaginal yeast infections are common and can be very uncomfortable. Before starting treatment yourself, it's a good idea to have your doctor confirm the diagnosis. Unfortunately, the infection can recur in the future and armed with knowledge about the symptoms and risk factors of this vaginal problem, treatment can be swift and effective.