

Vaginitis

For most women, a slight vaginal discharge is normal, often noticeably increased two weeks before a period is expected and lasting several days. Normal discharges are clear or white, non-irritating, and without noticeable odor.

A vaginal discharge requires medical attention when symptoms such as itching, irritation, unpleasant odor, or burning with urination occur. These symptoms may indicate an infection of the vagina and should be evaluated. Evaluation will include a pelvic examination during which a specimen of the discharge can be examined. In a sexually active person, these symptoms may be due to a sexually transmitted disease.

VAGINAL INFECTIONS

Vaginal yeast infections and bacterial vaginosis are common problems for women. While they sometimes occur after sexual intercourse and sometimes require treatment of a sexual partner, they often occur unrelated to sexual activity and are not usually classified as sexually transmitted diseases. There are other infections of the vagina which are almost always acquired through sexual contact and which potentially cause more serious health problems.

Candida or "Yeast" (formerly named monilia) is a common microscopic fungus, which grows normally in harmless quantities on the skin and in the large intestine, vagina, and other areas of many healthy women. If the ecological balance of the vagina is disturbed, yeast can multiply rapidly and may cause intense vaginal and vulvar itching, burning with urination, and painful intercourse. The discharge is characteristically heavy, white, and curdy (like cottage cheese). Common causes of imbalances in the normal flora or pH of the vagina include pregnancy, diabetes, antibiotic use, frequent douching, diaphragm use, and birth control pill use. Yeast infections may also occur without any of these factors.

Some vaginal antifungal creams that have been available only by prescription, such as clotrimazole (Gyne-Lotrimin) and miconazole (Monistat), are now available without prescription. Women who can recognize the symptoms of vaginal yeast infections can purchase these creams at pharmacies and treat themselves but should be alert to two issues: first, some other non-prescription preparations currently sold to treat "feminine itching" may actually aggravate the problem and should not be used; and second, if a woman is uncertain of what the problem is or if the symptoms do not resolve with self-treatment, she should check with her health care provider.

Bacterial Vaginosis (previously called Gardnerella) can be caused by several different bacteria, which normally inhabit the vagina. The symptoms occur when the natural balance of the vagina is upset, such as in a general state of lowered resistance, stress, diaphragm use, and sexual intercourse. Symptoms vary and may include mild itching and a yellowish or grayish white discharge, often with a disagreeable odor. If you have these symptoms and they continue for more than a few days, it is best to see your health care provider or women's health nurse practitioner for evaluation and treatment.

PREVENTION

Practice routine cleanliness. Wipe front to back after urinating and bowel movements. Be aware of cleanliness with sexual activity to avoid transferring bacteria from the rectum to the vagina.

Avoid chemicals that irritate the vagina, such as harsh soaps, feminine hygiene/deodorant sprays, perfumed toilet papers, and commercial douches. Deodorant tampons should not be used.

Dry thoroughly after bathing, before putting on underwear.

Wear cotton underwear. Cotton underwear will help keep the external area dry. Avoid nylon underwear, tight pantyhose, and body suits, which cause increased perspiration and retention of heat and moisture.

Be knowledgeable of general health care. Good nutrition, exercise, stopping smoking, and the reduction of stress contribute to improved personal health with increased resistance to all types of infections.

Avoid douching unless prescribed by a health care professional. Frequent douching may upset the natural balance of the vagina, which could cause an infection.

Follow safer sex practices to prevent sexually transmitted diseases. If you are sexually active with male partners, safer sex and condoms are the best ways to protect yourself against sexually transmitted diseases. Fact sheets that provide information about condoms, dental dams, and sexually transmitted infections are available on the UHS web site.

SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

Call 275-2662 to schedule an appointment at the University Health Service (UHS). UHS offers a full range of health care services for men and women. You can schedule an appointment with your primary care provider (PCP) or with one of the women's health nurse practitioners for gynecological care. All visits to UHS are confidential.

LINKS

Planned Parenthood
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/sexual-health/>

American Social Health Association
http://www.ashastd.org/learn/learn_vag_trich.cfm