

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, Gonorrhoea, 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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