

Vaginal and Vulval Health

What is a normal vaginal discharge?

The healthy vagina produces a fluid called discharge, which is made up of secretions from the cervix (entrance to the uterus), the vaginal walls and glands at the opening of the vagina. The amount varies considerably; some women will have very little while others will need a pad at times. It may also vary according to the stage of the menstrual cycle, sexual arousal, vaginal infections and occasionally, use of medications. The discharge is usually a whitish colour, drying yellow on underwear. It is not normal to have an unpleasant odour.

A variety of bacteria and yeasts (microorganisms) live in the vagina's mildly acidic environment. Lactobacillus is a bacterium that flourishes in the normal vagina and is thought to have a role in maintaining a healthy vaginal environment.

The balance between the bacteria and yeasts in the vagina may be upset in a variety of situations such as pregnancy, the use of antibiotics and diabetes. There can be overgrowth of some micro-organisms causing a change in the texture, amount, colour and odour of the discharge.

When is a discharge abnormal?

Any changes in amount, colour and odour, as well as itching and irritation, need to be checked. This is particularly important if there is any risk of a sexually transmitted infection. When a discharge is associated with the following symptoms, further assessment is **always** needed:

- Bleeding between periods or after sex.
- Pain passing urine.
- Uncomfortable or painful sex.
- Abdominal pain.
- Fever.

What is the vulva?

The vulva is the area of genital skin outside the vagina. This skin is particularly sensitive, and can be easily irritated causing itch, discomfort and painful sex. It is not normal to have vulval irritation or itch, but often simple remedies can settle symptoms. A doctor should assess vulval pain.

How can vaginal discharge and vulval irritations be avoided?

Avoid:

- soap and excessive washing of genitals

This is the single most important thing women can do to decrease vulval irritation.

Some women worry an irritation may be caused by lack of hygiene and wash frequently, only making the problem worse. Washing of the vulva should be brief and with warm, rather than hot, water. Soap is not needed.

- Vaginal sprays, perfume, talc or antiseptics.
- Tight fitting clothes.
- Perfumed toilet paper.
- Excessive heat.

Do:

- Change tampons and pads frequently.
- Wear cotton underwear, making sure it has been well rinsed.
- Change damp clothes as soon as possible.

Instead of soap, the following can be used:

- Plain sorbolene cream can be rubbed lightly onto the vulva and rinsed off.
- QV bar or lotion, or any other soap substitute.

What are the common vaginal infections?

The following infections occur either in the wall of the vagina or in the cervix:

- Bacterial Vaginosis.
- Thrush (Candidiasis).
- Trichomoniasis.
- Chlamydia.

If I have symptoms of a vaginal infection, what tests are done?

Generally the vagina and vulva will be carefully examined. It is usually necessary to insert a speculum into the vagina and swabs may be taken from the vagina and cervix and sent for testing. A urine test can be used to diagnose chlamydia. Occasionally a Pap smear done for other reasons may suggest an infection. Sometimes there is no recognisable cause for the discharge or irritation. In this case the woman can usually be reassured that, although the symptoms are unpleasant, there is nothing serious underlying them and she is not at risk of transmitting any infection to her partner.

Bacterial Vaginosis

What is it?

It is normal to have small amounts of bacteria in the vagina. Overgrowth of some of these bacteria causes Bacterial Vaginosis. It is a confusing condition in that it is not considered to be a sexually transmitted infection between males and females.

However, unprotected sex may be the trigger for the infection and may worsen symptoms. It may be transmitted from woman to woman through sexual contact.

Some women are particularly prone to this infection and there is usually no underlying cause. In these women, the infection tends to reoccur, despite treatment.

What are the symptoms?

Bacterial Vaginosis can cause a grey to green discharge with a stale or fishy odor that is often made worse by unprotected intercourse with a male partner. There may be some vulval irritation due to the volume of discharge, but it is not usually painful or itchy.

How is it treated?

Women without symptoms may show signs of Bacterial Vaginosis on a swab or Pap smear. Other women will have mild symptoms that come and go. Women in both these situations don't usually need to be treated, although the doctor may sometimes recommend it. If treatment is chosen, either a course of oral antibiotics or a prescribed vaginal cream is very effective. Unfortunately the treatments may not prevent the condition from returning.

Thrush (Candidiasis)

What is it?

The condition is caused by the yeast candida. This microorganism is found in the body without disease being present and is usually not harmful. It may overgrow and cause symptoms, particularly during pregnancy, in people with diabetes and during a course of antibiotics. Some women are particularly prone to thrush and get it for no apparent reason. Some may have recurrent symptoms just prior to their period. A thrush infection may cause irritation of the head of the penis in a male sexual partner.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms vary from mild to severe vulval irritation and itch, with a lumpy white-yellow vaginal discharge. There may be associated pain with intercourse and pain passing urine.

How is it treated?

Effective treatment for thrush may be as simple as an antifungal vaginal cream, which can be purchased from the chemist without a prescription. Tablets prescribed by a doctor are sometimes used. It is important to get a diagnosis from a health care practitioner before proceeding with treatment, as many conditions can imitate thrush infections. When thrush has already been diagnosed on previous occasions, it is not harmful to commence treatment. If treatment doesn't relieve symptoms, medical advice should be sought. If a male partner complains of irritation of his penis after intercourse, washing the penis in warm water or applying a small amount of antifungal cream can be helpful.

There are many complementary medicine remedies circulated for the treatment of thrush. It is difficult to prove or disprove their effectiveness. Some popular ones are:

- Dipping a tampon in natural yogurt or a weak vinegar solution and inserting it into the vagina for a few hours.
- Eating large amounts of lactobacillus yogurt.
- Oral lactobacillus drops.
- Yeast free diets.

It is important to seek medical advice before making any radical dietary changes.

Trichomoniasis

What is it?

This is caused by a small organism that lives in the bowel and vagina. It can also live for short periods of time in the male genital tract. It is usually sexually transmitted.

What are the symptoms?

Trichomoniasis may be present without causing symptoms or it may cause a green frothy vaginal discharge with an associated odour. There may be vaginal irritation and pain with sex. Male partners may have a minor irritation at the opening of the urethra.

How is it treated?

Trichomoniasis is easily treated with prescribed antibiotics. Sexual partners need to be treated regardless of symptoms.

Chlamydia

What is it?

Chlamydia is a common sexually transmitted infection of the cervix or urethra (the tube urine passes from).

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of chlamydia vary. A woman may have any or all of the following symptoms: pelvic pain, pain with sex, unusual discharge, pain passing urine and abnormal bleeding. However, about 70 % of women infected have no symptoms at all. *These women have nothing to alert them to their infection with chlamydia.* For this reason, women having unprotected sex with new partners often need to be tested. A swab from the cervix, or a urine test, can diagnose chlamydia. It is important to note that not all swabs will test for chlamydia, therefore these tests need to be specifically ordered. A Pap smear does *not* check for chlamydia.

How is it treated?

Untreated chlamydia can be serious. It may cause damage to the fallopian tubes which may lead to decreased fertility, risk of ectopic pregnancy (pregnancy in the tubes) and chronic pelvic pain. A woman may damage her fallopian tubes without she, or her partner, ever having a symptom of chlamydia. Fortunately, treatment with antibiotics is simple and very effective in the early stages. It is essential that all recent sexual partners are treated.

See the FPV Chlamydia pamphlet for more detailed information.



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