

Vaginitis

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What is it?

Vaginitis is an irritation or inflammation of the vagina. The chief symptom is a sudden, abnormal discharge, generally followed by itching, soreness, swelling and redness of the vagina and external genitalia. Some discharges are the natural normal mucus secretions of your reproductive system. But these are usually clear, odorless, and non-irritating.

Who gets it?

Vaginitis is one of the most common problems for women. It is estimated that half of all women will have vaginitis at least once during their lifetime - many women have them often.

What causes it?

Usually infections by fungi, bacteria, or microscopic parasites are the culprit. Some are caused by lack of hormones, others by commercial douches and vaginal sprays.

- **Bacterial vaginosis** is the most common form of vaginal infection and results from an overgrowth of normally harmless bacteria (*Gardnerella vaginalis* and others) in the vagina. A healthy vagina normally has a variety of bacteria present. Some of the bacteria are helpful and some are harmful. One type of helpful bacteria is called *Lactobacillus*. *Lactobacillus* helps stop the overgrowth of harmful bacteria by making the vagina slightly acidic. Having less *Lactobacillus* than normal may be one cause of bacterial vaginosis.

You can also trigger it during intercourse or because of improper wiping. Usually there is a thin milky-white or gray "fish" smelling discharge, especially after intercourse, but symptoms vary. There may be itching and burning as well, although some women have no symptoms at all.

Treatment of bacterial vaginosis is usually with oral or intravaginal antibiotics. It may be necessary to try several medications. Unfortunately, many women will get bacterial vaginosis more than once, just as they do a common cold or flu.

- **Yeast vaginitis**, which is caused by a fungus, is probably the 2nd most common form of vaginitis at this time. *Candida* is a fungus which is normally present in small and harmless quantities in the mouth, digestive tract and vagina. When the pH balance of the vagina is upset or when additional *Candida* organisms are introduced into the vagina, the fungus grows very quickly.

The main symptom is a thick white discharge that looks like cottage cheese and produces marked genital itching. The odor of the discharge is strong, but not really unpleasant. Sex may be uncomfortable and even painful during a *Candida* yeast infection.

A very common cause of yeast infections is antibiotics, which are used to clear up all kinds of infections caused by bacteria. Unfortunately, they also can destroy the normal *Lactobacilli* living in your vagina. Without these good bacteria keeping it in check, the yeast grows out of control, causing infection.

For mild symptoms, home remedies may help. While douching is not usually advised or necessary, some women do get relief from yeast infections by using a vinegar or baking soda douche (2 tablespoons of white vinegar or baking soda in a quart of warm water. Another remedy is boric acid suppositories placed high in the vagina twice a day. Fill size 3-0 gelatin capsules (found at pharmacies) with boric acid powder (found at grocery stores). Eating one eight-ounce serving of plain yogurt (containing *acidophilus* cultures) each day for two weeks may also help.

For more moderate to severe symptoms, treatment is with an anti-fungal medication usually in the form of vaginal suppositories or cream. Some of these medicines are now available without a prescription and you may use them when you know you have a yeast infection. You may have intercourse during treatment, but your partner should use a condom because his penis may carry the yeast and reinfect you when you have intercourse again. If the infection doesn't get better or comes back soon, you should see your doctor to make sure of the diagnosis and treatment. When the infections are frequent or when they are hard to cure, your doctor may prescribe medicine to be taken by mouth.

- **Trichomonas** is caused by a microscopic parasite usually at the end of a period. It produces a foul smelling yellow-greenish discharge which is often "frothy". There may be itching in or around your vagina.

Urination is often frequent and painful. Sex may be painful too. Trichomonas is transmitted through intimate sexual contact.

Treatment is usually with an oral medication and must be given to all sexual partners in order to prevent reinfection.

- **Herpes vaginitis** is caused by a virus called *herpes simplex*. Symptoms usually include genital sores and blisters that hurt when you urinate or have intercourse. You also may experience itching and watery discharge.

There is no cure for herpes. Herpes likely will recur off and on through out a woman's lifetime. There are medications which may make the infection shorter and less painful.

- **Atrophic vaginitis** occurs only in women who are well into menopause or have had their ovaries removed. As the body's supply of estrogen diminishes, the vaginal walls become thinner and more susceptible to infection. There may be itching and watery discharge; intercourse may be painful.

Treatment of atrophic vaginitis is frequently successful with vaginal hormone cream. It may also be treated with oral hormones.

Things that often make vaginitis worse

- Improper diet
- Lack of sleep
- Presence of another disease
- Antibiotics
- Lack of hormones
- Excessive douching
- Pregnancy
- Stress
- Cuts or abrasions of the vagina
- Childbirth
- Intercourse
- Tight fitting clothing

- **Irritative vaginitis** - This can be caused by the chemicals in commercial douches and vaginal sprays, especially when these are used excessively. The vaginal lining is sensitive thin skin which may react to the trauma from douching or chemical irritation. It can be made worse by the fact that some women will douche

increasingly as their vaginal symptoms worsen. Treatment consists of discontinuing douching to allow the normal bacteria to return.

How do you prevent it?

There is no way to be sure you won't get vaginitis. You can minimize the chances by following the rules of good hygiene: clean underwear, clean bathing suits, frequent baths or showers. Make it a point to wash the inner surface of the external genitals with mild soap, then dry carefully. Remember that infectious organisms thrive in hot, moist environments, especially those created by nylon underwear, tight jeans and pantyhose. If you're troubled by recurrent vaginitis, you may want to wear cotton panties and stockings with a garter belt. Skirts and looser pants may also be advisable.

Avoid the problem of getting bowel bacteria into your vagina by always wiping front to back after bowel movement. Avoid vaginal sprays or at least don't direct the spray into your vagina. Finally, if you don't have a steady, dependable sexual partner, then it may be wise to insist that your friends wear condoms.

Are there complications?

Of all the women who are troubled by vaginitis, most will suffer nothing more than a temporary annoyance. However, herpes vaginitis (genital herpes) causes lifelong infection and can potentially cause life threatening infection in babies born to mothers who are having an outbreak. Therefore, pregnant women with active herpes often deliver by cesarean section.

In summary

- The majority of women will have vaginitis at least once during their lifetime.
- Vaginitis is generally not serious.
- Most cases of vaginitis are caused by infections although there are other causes.
- Good vaginal hygiene is the best prevention.
- Take any prescriptions exactly as directed.
- For more information contact your doctor or the American Academy of Family Physicians at familydoctor.org or the National Women's Health Information Center at www.4woman.gov