Vaginal Infections

What is a healthy vagina?
The pH balance of the vagina is acidic, which discourages infections from occurring. A healthy vagina produces secretions to cleanse and regulate itself, similar to the function of saliva in the mouth. Any interference with the delicate balance of vaginal secretions sets up an environment conducive to infection.

All women have some vaginal discharge. Normal discharge may appear clear, cloudy white, and/or yellowish when dry on clothing. It may also contain white flecks and be thin and stringy. Changes in normal discharge can occur due to menstrual cycle, emotional stressors, nutritional status, pregnancy, sexual arousal, and usage of medications, including birth control pills.

The menstrual cycle affects the vaginal environment. You may notice increased wetness and clear discharge around mid-cycle. The pH balance of the vagina fluctuates during the cycle and is the least acidic on the days just prior to and during menstruation. Infections, therefore, are most common at this time.

What signals abnormal discharge?
Any changes in color or amount of discharge may be a sign of a vaginal infection. If you experience any of the symptoms below, you may have a vaginal infection:
  - Discharge accompanied by itching, rash, or soreness
  - Persistent, increased discharge
  - Burning during urination
  - White, clumpy discharge (somewhat like cottage cheese)
  - Grey/white or yellow/green discharge with a foul odor

Common Vaginal Infections

Bacterial Vaginosis
Similar to a yeast infection, bacterial vaginosis results from an overgrowth of bacteria, upsetting the delicate balance of the vaginal environment. Recurrence of bacterial vaginosis is common and bacterial vaginosis can coexist with other vaginal infections. Nearly half of women with bacterial vaginosis have no symptoms; however, symptoms include:
  - Increased amount of discharge
  - Grey/white, thin, and watery discharge
  - Foul/fishy odor with discharge
  - Increased odor to discharge immediately after intercourse

Treatment: Metronidazole (Flagyl), an antibiotic available in either an oral or a topical cream, is prescribed. There is no over-the-counter treatment available.

Trichomoniasis
Caused by a one-celled protozoan organism, trichomoniasis is almost always spread through sexual contact. However, because the organism can survive up to 24 hours in a moist environment, wet towels or bathing suits from someone with an infection can be used to spread it. Most men and some women don't display any symptoms; however, when present, symptoms include:
  - Yellow/green, frothy discharge
  - Foul odor with discharge
  - Increased amount of discharge
  - Inflammation of vulva/vagina
  - Increased frequency of urination
  - Itching

Treatment: The oral antibiotic, metronidazole (Flagyl), is prescribed. Both partners should be treated—even if one is not displaying symptoms—to avoid recurrent infections.

Monilia (Yeast) Infection
A yeast infection occurs when there is an overabundance of yeast (Candida albicans) in the vagina, often caused by a change in the pH balance of the vagina. Yeast infections are not usually sexually transmitted. Some factors that may increase susceptibility include:
  - Increased stress
  - Oral contraceptives
  - Diabetes
  - Pregnancy
  - Antibiotics (protective bacteria are destroyed by antibiotics, allowing yeast overgrowth)

Symptoms include:
  - Increased amount of discharge
  - White, clumpy (cottage cheese-like) discharge
  - Redness, itching, and burning in vaginal/vulvar area

Treatment: The goal of treatment is to reduce the overgrowth of yeast organisms and return the vagina to a healthy balance. Treatment consists of antifungal agents in the form of tablets, vaginal creams or suppositories. Over-the-counter treatments are available. However, if you are pregnant, always be sure to have any medications approved by a health care provider.

How do I prevent and treat vaginal infections?
  - Have sexual partners wear condoms during intercourse.
  - Stay healthy, eat well, get enough sleep, and drink enough fluids.
  - Keep vaginal area clean and dry.
  - Wear cotton underwear.
  - Wipe from front to back after urination or bowel movement.
  - Avoid using deodorant pads or tampons.
  - Don’t use petroleum jelly or other oils for lubricants.
• Don't douche.
• Use medication as long as directed.
• Avoid sexual intercourse until treatment is completed and you are symptom-free.
• Don't scratch infected or inflamed areas; it can cause further irritation.
• If using medication inside the vagina, use it during the menstrual period.
• During an infection, use pads rather than tampons if menstruation occurs.
• Avoid vulvovaginal irritants, including perfumed or deodorant soaps/body washes.

If symptoms persist after completing the treatment, please call Dial-A-Nurse at 289-8700 to schedule an appointment. Use nothing in the vagina for 48 hours prior to your exam.

McKinley Health Center
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Hed-Hand – Vaginal Discharge: Knowing the difference between normal discharge and infections

Student Health Center
Special Programs Building
28 Westhampton Way
University of Richmond, VA 23173

Phone (804) 289-8064
Dial-A-Nurse (804) 289-8700
Fax (804) 287-6466

wellness.richmond.edu