

VAGINAL INFECTIONS

All women have vaginal discharge. The nature of the discharge (e.g., amount, thickness) changes with the phases of her menstrual cycle. Although it varies in each woman, a normal discharge resembles clear or white mucus, scant after the menses, heavier and more fluid and clear and slippery at ovulation, and reverting back to scant and sticky toward the end of the month. Changes in the color, texture or odor of her normal discharge, and the presence of itching, burning or irritation can be signs of vaginal infection. Vaginitis means inflammation or infection of the vagina, and most cases are caused by an imbalance in the normal ecosystem of the vagina, rather than by foreign bacteria or sexually transmitted infection. Woman to woman transmission is possible with any vaginal infection, yet only trichomoniasis is likely to be spread between a male and female during sexual intercourse.

CANDIDIASIS OR MONILIA VAGINITIS (aka “yeast”)

Most commonly, vaginitis is caused by an overgrowth of a fungal organism, or yeast, which is a normal inhabitant of the vagina. When stress, antibiotics, hormonal changes, spermicides or increased sexual activity disrupts the ecological balance, yeast may proliferate. Yeast infections are more common before the menses, and may resolve with menstruation.

Typically, symptoms of yeast infection include vaginal and vulvar itching and irritation, a white clumpy discharge and a raw or burning feeling. A medical exam is advised if one is not certain of the diagnosis before initiating treatment.

Various treatments for yeast infections are now available without a prescription. Over the counter products work well for most yeast infections. Occasionally, a prescription cream or pill is advised. Women with frequent yeast infections should consult with a clinician to verify the diagnosis, search for an underlying cause, and consider other treatment options.

BACTERIAL VAGINOSIS (aka “BV’ or “Gardnerella”)

Bacterial Vaginosis is another infection caused by imbalance in the vaginal flora, but this one is a bacterial problem. This condition causes a creamy discharge with a fishy odor. The odor becomes more apparent after sexual intercourse and after the menstrual period. Treatment options vary. Antibacterial vaginal creams such as Metrogel or Cleocin work quite well. Infrequently oral medication is prescribed. Like yeast, since it is an imbalance not a sexually transmitted disease, it may recur. Sometimes the two infections are present at the same time.

TRICHOMONIASIS (aka “trich”)

Trichomonads are protozoans (single celled organisms) which can cause symptoms of heavy, frothy, yellow discharge, irritation, itching, urinary discomfort and redness of the tissues. This infection is sexually transmitted, and treatment consists of treating both the patient and her partner/s with an oral antibiotic. The

medication can have unpleasant side effects, especially if taken with alcohol, and is critical that instructions with its use be followed.

DIAGNOSIS OF VAGINITIS

In order to properly diagnose a vaginal infection, the vulva and vagina are examined and a sample of the discharge examined under the microscope to identify the organism. **Prior to an exam, douching or using vaginal cream for two days should be avoided, as they will interfere with diagnosis.**

Sexually transmitted diseases such as chlamydia or gonorrhea require specific testing which can be done at the same time the other specimen is collected. Although they often cause an increase in discharge, these STIs may produce little or no symptoms such as the itching and irritation seen in Yeast, BV, or Trich. We recommend using the opportunity of a vaginitis exam to test for gonorrhea and chlamydia if you are not using condoms for STD protection, especially if you have a new partner.

TREATMENT

Knowing what infection you have allows for a specific treatment of the involved organism. Again, do not treat yourself right before coming in for an exam. Many recommendations exist for herbal or alternative treatments for vaginitis. Some may be helpful, and some may be harmful. Douching, for instance, may decrease the symptoms of an infection without really curing it, and has been linked to a small increased risk of infertility and ectopic pregnancy.

PREVENTION

Since vaginitis is caused by a disruption in the normal vaginal ecosystem, anything that interferes with your general health may be contributing to recurrent infections. Remember that adequate sleep, good nutrition, and regular exercise help your body cope with stress. Strong soap, personal hygiene products, douching, and tight clothing may interfere with the balance of normal bacteria. In a small number of women, recurrent vaginal infections may be associated with conditions such as Diabetes, HIV, or dermatological disorders, and require further evaluation.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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