

First in a Series

Vaginal Health

By Ashleigh Eisbrener

Although vaginal health concerns affect over half of the women in the United States, many of us choose to ignore them. Regardless of your level of sexual activity, it's extremely important to familiarize yourself with some of the most common problems. We gathered the information you need on the most common vaginal infections, how to treat them and how to keep yourself healthy.

What's Normal?

First of all, familiarize yourself with two important terms: vulva and vagina. The vulva is a term for all the external female genitalia, and the vagina is the muscular internal tube that serves as a passageway for menstrual flow and childbirth. A healthy vagina is abundant with lactobacilli, small, beneficial bacteria that prevents other organisms from infecting the vagina and maintains its mildly-acidic environment. Vaginal health can be determined by the vagina's odor and discharge. If you notice abnormalities or concerns, contact your doctor right away.

Normal Odor

Each woman has an individual scent influenced by factors, including sweat and discharge. A slightly pungent or earthy odor is normal, but an unpleasant smell is a sign something may be wrong.

Normal Discharge

Vaginal discharge is made of exfoliated skin cells, bacteria and secretions. Each individual's amount, texture and color of discharge varies. It can range in color from clear, to white, to yellow, and its function is to serve as a natural protectant against foreign organisms and keep the vagina moist and clean. It may be heavier when a woman is sexually aroused, pregnant or taking birth control pills and may be lighter in postmenopausal women.

What's Not Normal?

Gray, green or dark yellow secretions that have a foul odor, such as fish, ammonia or yeast are signs of an unhealthy vagina. These symptoms, which may also be accompanied by burning, itching or irritation, can be a sign of a vaginal infection, sexually transmitted infection or improper hygiene habits. A professional diagnosis is always necessary so treatment can be administered accordingly. If you experience severe abdominal pain, pain with urination or a fever, seek immediate medical care.

Regular gynecologic exams are a key part of your health care and are extremely important to your total health and well-being. From the start of menstruation to the end of menopause and beyond, a number of problems can occur. By having routine exams, your doctor can detect problems and treat them before they worsen.

Vaginitis

This term describes any inflammation of the vagina. The most common cause of inflammation is infections, but they can also be caused by trauma or an allergy to products, such as latex. The most common infections are yeast infections, bacterial vaginosis, trichomaniasis and atrophic vaginitis.

Yeast Infections

Also known as candida vaginitis, yeast infections are caused by fungi, normally present in the vagina, that overgrow causing itching, redness and a discharge that resembles cottage cheese. This infection can be triggered by antibiotics; stress; medical conditions; a warm, moist genital environment; and hormonal fluctuations. Since they kill healthy lactobacilli, antibiotics are the most common cause of yeast infections, but you can avoid this by eating yogurt, which replaces normal bacteria.

Treatment: Common treatments are over-the-counter vaginal creams, such as three-day Monistat or prescription drug, Diflucan.

Bacterial Vaginosis

Similar to a yeast infection, bacterial vaginosis is also caused by an overgrowth of organisms; however, they are bacteria rather than fungi. This unhealthy bacteria growth occurs when the pH balance of the vagina becomes more alkaline than mildly acidic because the lactobacilli are unable to live, allowing bacteria to take over. Symptoms include a fishy odor, vaginal irritation, burning with urination and a white-gray discharge.

Treatment: Effective treatment includes special antibiotics taken orally or by use of a vaginal applicator. The oral medication can cause side effects, such as bad taste in the mouth and upset stomach. The vaginal gel has fewer side effects but must be applied nightly for five days.

Trichomaniasis

This is a microorganism that can infect both the vagina and urethra and is usually sexually transmitted. It often causes women to have a "frothy" yellow-gray discharge, unpleasant odor and vulvar irritation, but men usually don't have symptoms.

Treatment: Trichomaniasis can easily be treated with an oral antibiotic. It should be taken by both partners.

Atrophic Vaginitis

This infection is usually the result of reduced estrogen levels following menopause. Vaginal tissues become thinner and drier, leading to itching, burning or pain. Decreased estrogen is a natural effect of perimenopause and postmenopause but can be caused by other factors as well. Symptoms consist of vaginal soreness and itching, painful intercourse, bleeding after intercourse, vaginal dryness, vaginal burning, burning with urination and urgency with urination.

Treatment: Vaginal estrogen therapy comes in a few forms: vaginal estrogen cream can be inserted into the vagina with an applicator; a soft, flexible ring can be inserted into the upper part of the vagina, releasing doses of estrogen; or a tablet can be placed into the vagina with an applicator.

Always remember to consult a physician if you notice any abnormalities. Since many of these infections trigger the same symptoms, self-diagnosis is often ineffective.