

Vaginal Infections

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Vaginal infections (vaginitis) is a term that describes disorders of the vagina caused by infection, inflammation (swelling), or changes in normal bacteria levels.

In general, symptoms often include vaginal discharge, odor, itching or discomfort.

During pregnancy, it is normal to have an increase in vaginal discharge. It is usually clear and mucus-like.

Women with bacterial vaginosis or trichomoniasis are more likely to have a baby that is born early (preterm) or with a low birth weight.

Types of Vaginal Infections

The most common types of vaginal infections are bacterial vaginosis, vaginal yeast infection and trichomoniasis.

Bacterial vaginosis

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is the most common cause of vaginal discharge in women of childbearing age.

Any woman can develop bacterial vaginosis, but some activities can upset the normal balance of bacteria in your vagina and put you at greater risk for the infection. These activities include:

- pregnancy
- using an intrauterine device (IUD)
- douching
- sexual intercourse.

If you develop bacterial vaginosis you may notice:

- an abnormal vaginal discharge with an unpleasant odor that may remind you of fish. The discharge may be white or gray and thin.
- a burning feeling when you urinate
- pain, itching or burning inside or outside of your vagina.

Some women report they have no signs or symptoms with bacterial vaginosis.

Vaginal yeast infection

A vaginal yeast infection is caused by a fungus (Candida). It is not a sexually transmitted infection, but it may cause symptoms in partners.

Yeast infections are caused by an overgrowth of the Candida organism. Candida exists in your body and is kept at normal levels by the natural bacteria in your body. When the normal balance of bacteria in your vagina is upset, the Candida organisms overgrow and cause an infection.

Taking antibiotics, being pregnant or having diabetes can upset the normal balance of bacteria in your vagina. If you develop a vaginal yeast infection you may notice:

- thick, white vaginal discharge
- pain, itching or redness (rash) in your genital area
- pain during sexual intercourse
- painful urination.

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Trichomoniasis

Trichomoniasis is a sexually transmitted infection caused by the parasite *Trichomonas vaginalis*.

Most people have no symptoms. If symptoms do happen (usually 5 to 28 days after being exposed), they may include:

- clear, white or yellow-green vaginal discharge with a strong, unpleasant odor that may remind you of fish
- burning feeling when urinating
- pain during sexual intercourse
- irritation, inflammation (swelling), redness or itching in the genital area
- lower abdominal pain, but this is rare.

Men rarely have symptoms. If symptoms appear, they may include:

- white discharge from the penis
- painful urination or trouble urinating
- itching or irritation inside the penis.

Diagnosing a Vaginal Infection

You will be asked about your symptoms and have a physical exam. During the exam, a swab may be inserted in your vagina to collect a sample of vaginal discharge. The swab will be sent to the lab to test for one of these vaginal infections.

Treatment

Your treatment will depend on the type of vaginal infection.

Bacterial vaginosis and trichomoniasis will not go away with home care or over-the-counter medicines. If left untreated, these infections can increase your risk of getting or spreading other sexually transmitted infections (such as HIV.)

Your health care provider will give you a prescription for an antibiotic. Take the medicine as directed. Do not stop taking it even if you feel better.

If you have trichomoniasis, your sexual partner will also need to be treated so you do not get infected again.

A yeast infection is treated with an antifungal medicine. If you have a yeast infection during pregnancy, you should see your health care provider for treatment.

During treatment for a vaginal infection, do not:

- douche
- use feminine hygiene sprays or powders
- have sexual intercourse.

Keep your genital area clean and dry. Try to take showers instead of baths. This will also help prevent future infections.