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1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Vaginal Yeast Infections

Q: What is a vaginal yeast infection?

A: A vaginal yeast infection is irritation of the vagina and the area around it called the vulva (vul-vuh).

Yeast is a type of fungus. Yeast infections are caused by overgrowth of the fungus *Candida albicans*. Small amounts of yeast are always in the vagina. But when too much yeast grows, you can get an infection.

Yeast infections are very common. About 75 percent of women have one during their lives. And almost half of women have two or more vaginal yeast infections.

Q: What are the signs of a vaginal yeast infection?

A: The most common symptom of a yeast infection is extreme itchiness in and around the vagina.

Other symptoms include:

- burning, redness, and swelling of the vagina and the vulva
- pain when passing urine
- pain during sex
- soreness
- a thick, white vaginal discharge that looks like cottage cheese and does not have a bad smell
- a rash on the vagina

You may only have a few of these symptoms. They may be mild or severe.

Q: Should I call my doctor if I think I have a yeast infection?

A: Yes, you need to see your doctor to find out for sure if you have a yeast infection. The signs of a yeast infection are much like those of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) like Chlamydia (KLUH-mid-ee-uh) and gonorrhea (gahn-uh-REE-uh). So, it's hard to be sure you have a yeast infection and not something more serious.

If you've had vaginal yeast infections before, talk to your doctor about using over-the-counter medicines.

Q: How is a vaginal yeast infection diagnosed?

A: Your doctor will do a pelvic exam to look for swelling and discharge. Your doctor may also use a swab to take a fluid sample from your vagina. A quick look with a microscope or a lab test will show if yeast is causing the problem.

Q: Why did I get a yeast infection?

A: Many things can raise your risk of a vaginal yeast infection, such as:

- stress
- lack of sleep
- sickness
- poor eating habits, including eating extreme amounts of sugary foods
- pregnancy
- having your period
- taking certain medicines, including birth control pills, antibiotics, and steroids



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- diseases such as poorly controlled diabetes and HIV/AIDS
- hormonal changes during your periods

Q: Can I get a yeast infection from having sex?

A: Yes, but it is rare. Most often, women don't get yeast infections from sex. The most common cause is a weak immune system.

Q: How are yeast infections treated?

A: Yeast infections can be cured with antifungal medicines that come as:

- creams
- tablets
- ointments or suppositories that are inserted into the vagina

These products can be bought over the counter at the drug store or grocery store. Your doctor can also prescribe you a single dose of oral fluconazole (floo-con-uh-zohl). But do not use this drug if you are pregnant.

Infections that don't respond to these medicines are starting to be more common. Using antifungal medicines when you don't really have a yeast infection can raise your risk of getting a hard-to-treat infection in the future.

Q: Is it safe to use over-the-counter medicines for yeast infections?

A: Yes, but always talk with your doctor before treating yourself for a vaginal yeast infection if you:

- are pregnant

- have never been diagnosed with a yeast infection
- keep getting yeast infections

Studies show that two-thirds of women who buy these products don't really have a yeast infection. Using these medicines the wrong way may lead to a hard-to-treat infection. Plus, treating yourself for a yeast infection when you really have something else may worsen the problem. Certain STIs that go untreated can cause cancer, infertility, pregnancy problems, and other health problems.

If you decide to use these over-the-counter medicines, read and follow the directions carefully. Some creams and inserts may weaken condoms and diaphragms.

Q: If I have a yeast infection, does my sexual partner need to be treated?

A: Yeast infections are not STIs, and health experts don't know for sure if they are transmitted sexually. About 12 to 15 percent of men get an itchy rash on the penis if they have unprotected sex with an infected woman. If this happens to your partner, he should see a doctor. Men who haven't been circumcised are at higher risk.

Lesbians may be at risk for spreading yeast infections to their partner(s). Research is still being done to find out. If your female partner has any symptoms, she should also be tested and treated.



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Q: What should I do if I get repeat yeast infections?

A: Call your doctor. About 5 percent of women get four or more vaginal yeast infections in 1 year. This is called recurrent vulvovaginal candidiasis (RVVC). RVVC is more common in women with diabetes or weak immune systems. Doctors most often treat this problem with antifungal medicine for up to 6 months.

Q: How can I avoid getting another yeast infection?

A: To help prevent vaginal yeast infections, you can:

- avoid douches
- avoid scented hygiene products like bubble bath, sprays, pads, and tampons
- change tampons and pads often during your period
- avoid tight underwear or clothes made of synthetic fibers
- wear cotton underwear and pantyhose with a cotton crotch
- change out of wet swimsuits and exercise clothes as soon as you can
- avoid hot tubs and very hot baths

If you keep getting yeast infections, be sure and talk with your doctor. ■



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For more information...

For more information about yeast infections, call the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, NIH, HHS

Phone number: (866) 284-4107
Internet address: www.niaid.nih.gov/publications/stds.htm

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, HHS

Phone number: (800) CDC-INFO or (800) 232-4636
Internet address: www.cdc.gov

CDC National Prevention Information Network (NPIN), CDC, HHS

Phone number: (800) 458-5231
Internet Address: www.cdcnpin.org

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

Phone number: (800) 762-2264 (for publications requests only)
Internet address: www.acog.org

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Phone number: (800) 230-7526 or (800) 230-PLAN
Internet address: www.plannedparenthood.org

Association of Reproductive Health Professionals

Phone number: (202) 466-3825
Internet address: www.arhp.org/

National Women's Health Resource Center

Phone number: (877) 986-9472
Internet address: www.healthywomen.org/healthtopics/yeastinfections

American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP)

Internet address: <http://familydoctor.org>

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