

Vaginitis

What is vaginitis?

Vaginitis is an inflammation of the vagina. When the vulva is also inflamed, it is called vulvovaginitis. (The vulva is the fold of skin covering the opening to the vagina.) Vaginitis can occur in females of any age.

How does it occur?

Vaginitis can be caused by organisms that infect the vagina or by irritants, such as soap or powders. Some but not all organisms that cause vaginitis are sexually transmitted. Organisms that can infect the vagina include:

- A fungus called *Candida albicans*, which produces a thick, cheesy discharge from the vagina. This is also known as a yeast infection.
- Protozoa (tiny one-celled organisms) called *Trichomonas vaginalis*, which cause a foamy, bad-smelling vaginal discharge.
- An overgrowth of bacteria normally found in the vagina, causing a condition called bacterial vaginosis or nonspecific vaginitis. The bacteria produce a bad-smelling "fishy" discharge.
- Viruses such as herpes or human papillomavirus.

Irritants that can cause vaginitis include:

- condoms and diaphragms
- spermicidal foams, gels, and creams
- feminine hygiene products such as perfumed sprays and powders
- douching
- nonabsorbent, heat-retaining clothing such as nylon pantyhose and tights
- tampons
- sexual devices
- physical injury.

Vaginitis can also be caused by psychological stress, poor hygiene, and a lack of estrogen hormone. Sometimes the cause of vaginitis is not known.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom of vaginitis is excessive whitish or yellowish discharge from the vagina. Some milky vaginal discharge is normal for females of all ages.

You may also have:

- an unpleasant odor from the vagina
- itching
- a swollen, red vulva that may be painful or itchy
- painful intercourse.

If you have pain in your lower abdomen or irregular bleeding with these symptoms, see your health care provider immediately. Some sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) have symptoms similar to the symptoms of vaginitis. If you are at risk for an STD and have the above symptoms, you should see your health care provider right away.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will examine you and do lab tests. The lab tests may include looking at the vaginal discharge under a microscope, urine tests, cultures, and blood tests.

How is it treated?

The goal of treatment is to eliminate the organisms or irritants that are causing the symptoms. Infections are treated with oral antibiotics, antifungal or antibacterial creams or gels, vaginal tablets, or vaginal inserts. Your health care provider may ask you to stop sexual activity for a time. Your provider may also ask that your partner be treated to prevent reinfection or spread of the infection. Vaginitis caused by irritants can usually be treated by stopping exposure to the irritant. Some irritations are treated with steroid or hormone creams. For women in menopause, vaginal dryness (atrophic vaginitis) can be treated with hormone pills or cream.

How long will the effects last?

The symptoms usually start to decrease after a day of treatment. Infections clear up in about a week. It is very important that you take all of your prescribed medication, even if your symptoms are gone. This will help to prevent recurrence. If you stop taking your medication after the symptoms are relieved but before the scheduled end of treatment, the infection or irritation may come back.

How can I take care of myself?

To help relieve the symptoms you can:

- Bathe with nonirritating, unscented soap. Use water that is warm but not hot. Rinse the genital area thoroughly but gently. Pat dry without rubbing.
- Wear loose-fitting, all-cotton underwear or cotton-crotch underwear.
- Keep your genital area dry.

Call your health care provider if you notice a change in color, consistency, or quantity of vaginal discharge.

What can be done to help prevent vaginitis?

Practice good personal hygiene:

- Bathe daily with mild soap and warm water.
- Wear all-cotton underwear or underwear with cotton crotches.
- Change underwear and pantyhose every day.
- Avoid wearing pantyhose or tights for too many hours, especially in hot, humid weather.
- Wear cotton leotards and tights when you exercise.
- Use deodorant-free white toilet paper to avoid perfume and dye that might irritate.
- Avoid using feminine hygiene products (such as sprays and powders) and bath additives (such as bubble baths and oils).
- Avoid douching more than once a month. Douching is not necessary.
- Use deodorant-free sanitary pads or tampons.
- Avoid spermicidal foams, gels, and creams.

Menopausal women may use hormone medicine if recommended by their health care provider.

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