

Preventing Vaginal Infection

These steps can help you stay comfortable during treatment of a vaginal infection. They also help prevent vaginal infections in the future.

Keeping a healthy balance

Factors that change the normal balance in the vagina can lead to a vaginal infection. To help keep the balance normal, try these tips:

- Change out of wet bathing suits and damp exercise clothes as soon as possible. Yeast thrive in a warm, moist environment.
- Avoid wearing tight pants. Choose cotton underwear and pantyhose that have a cotton crotch. Cotton keeps you cooler and drier than synthetics.
- Don't douche unless directed by your healthcare provider. Douching can destroy friendly bacteria and change the vagina's normal balance.
- Wipe from front to back after using the toilet. This prevents bacteria from spreading from the anus to the vulva.
- Wash the vulva with mild, unscented soap or with plain water.
- Wash your diaphragm, spermicide applicators, and sex toys with mild soap and water after use. Dry them thoroughly before putting them away.
- Change tampons often (every 2 hours to 4 hours). Leaving a tampon in for too long may disrupt the balance of vaginal bacteria.
- Avoid vaginal sprays, scented toilet paper and soaps, and deodorant tampons or pads, which can cause vaginal irritation

Staying healthy overall

Good overall health can help you resist infection. To be healthier:

- Help protect yourself from STIs (sexually transmitted infections) by using latex condoms for intercourse. Ask your healthcare provider for more information about safer sex.
- Eat a variety of healthy foods.
- Exercise regularly.
- Get enough rest and sleep.
- Maintain a healthy weight. If you need to lose weight, ask your healthcare provider for advice on how to start.

Preventing Vaginitis

Vaginitis is irritation or infection of the vagina or vulva (the outside opening of the vagina). Vaginitis can be caused by bacteria, viruses, parasites, or yeast. Chemicals (such as in perfumes or soaps or in spermicides) can sometimes be a cause. Vaginitis can be caused by hormone changes in pregnancy or with menopause. You can help prevent vaginitis. Follow the tips below. And see your healthcare provider if you have any symptoms.



Hygiene

- Avoid chemicals. Do not use vaginal sprays. Do not use scented toilet paper or tampons that are scented. Sprays and scents have chemicals that can irritate your vagina.
- Do not douche unless you are told to by your healthcare provider. Douching is rarely needed. And it upsets the normal balance in the vagina.
- Wash yourself well. Wash the outer vaginal area (vulva) every day with mild, unscented soap. Keep it as dry as possible.
- Wipe correctly. Make sure to wipe from front to back after a bowel movement. This helps keep from spreading bacteria from your anus to your vagina.
- Change your tampon often. During your period, make sure to change your tampon as often as directed on the package. This allows the normal flow of vaginal discharge and blood.

Use mild, unscented soap when you bathe or shower to avoid irritating your vagina.

Lifestyle

- Limit your number of sexual partners. The more partners you have, the greater your risk of infection. Using condoms helps reduce your risk.
- Get enough sleep. Sleep helps keep your body's immune system healthy. This helps you fight infection.
- Lose weight, if needed. Excess weight can reduce air circulation around your vagina. This can increase your risk of infection.
- Exercise regularly. Regular activity helps keep your body healthy.
- Take antibiotics only as directed. Antibiotics can change the normal chemical balance in the vagina.

Clothing

- Don't sit in wet clothes. Yeast thrives when it's warm and damp.
- Don't wear tight pants. And don't wear tights, leggings, or hose without a cotton crotch. These types of clothing trap warmth and moisture.
- Wear cotton underwear. Cotton lets air circulate around the vagina.

Symptoms of vaginitis

- Irritation, swelling, or itching of the genital area
- Vaginal discharge
- Bad vaginal odor
- Pain or burning during urination

Vaginal Infection: Bacterial Vaginosis

Both good and bad bacteria are present in a healthy vagina. Bacterial vaginosis (BV) occurs when these bacteria get out of balance. The numbers of good bacteria decrease. This allows the numbers of bad bacteria to increase and cause BV. In most cases, BV is not a serious problem.

Causes of bacterial vaginosis

The cause of BV is not clear. Douching may lead to it. Having sex with a new partner or more than 1 partner makes it more likely.

Symptoms of bacterial vaginosis

Symptoms of BV vary for each woman. Some women have few symptoms or none at all. If symptoms are present, they can include:

- Thin, milky white or gray or sometimes green discharge
- Unpleasant "fishy" odor
- Irritation, itching, and burning at opening of vagina which may indicate mixed vaginitis
- Burning or irritation with sex or urination which may indicate mixed vaginitis

Diagnosing bacterial vaginosis

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and health history. He or she will also do a pelvic exam. This is an exam of your vagina and cervix. A sample of vaginal fluid or discharge may be taken. This sample is checked for signs of BV.

Treating bacterial vaginosis

BV is often treated with antibiotics. They may be given in oral pill form or as a vaginal cream. To use these medicines:

- Be sure to take all of your medicine, even if your symptoms go away.
- If you're taking antibiotic pills, do not drink alcohol until you're finished with all of your medicine.
- If you're using vaginal cream, apply it as directed. Be aware that the cream may make condoms and diaphragms less effective.
- Call your healthcare provider if symptoms do not go away within 4 days of starting treatment. Also call if you have a reaction to the medicine.

Why treatment matters

Even if you have no symptoms or your symptoms are mild, BV should be treated. Untreated BV can lead to health problems such as:

- Increased risk of preterm delivery if you're pregnant
- Increased risk of complications after surgery on the reproductive organs
- Possible increased risk of pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)

Vaginal Infection: Trichomoniasis

Trichomoniasis is often called "trich." It is caused by a parasite that is passed during sex. Men with trich often don't have any symptoms. So they don't know that they are infected. In women, it can take weeks or months before symptoms develop.

Symptoms of trichomoniasis

- Foamy gray or yellow-green discharge
- Foul odor
- Intense vaginal itching, burning, redness, and swelling at opening of vagina
- Pain during sex or urination
- Bleeding after sex



Whether or not he has symptoms, your partner will also need to be treated for trichomoniasis.

Treating trichomoniasis

Trichy is treated with antibiotics. Be sure that you:

- Finish all of your medicine. This is true even if your symptoms go away.
- Avoid alcohol until you're done with all your medicine.
- Tell your partner so that he can seek treatment and be tested for other STDs.
- Avoid sex until you and your partner are both done with treatment.

Why treatment matters

Untreated trich can lead to problems. These include:

- Increased risk of preterm delivery if you are pregnant
- An abnormal Pap test result
- Possible increased risk of pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)

Vaginal Infection: Understanding the Vaginal Environment

The vagina is a canal. It connects the uterus (womb) to the outside of the body. It is home to many types of bacteria and other tiny organisms. These different bacteria most often stay balanced in number. This keeps the vagina healthy. If the balance changes, it can cause infection.

A healthy environment

Many types of bacteria are present in a healthy vagina. When balanced, they don't cause problems. Small amounts of yeast may also be present without causing problems. The most common type of bacteria in the vagina is **lactobacillus**. It helps keep the vagina at a low pH. A low pH keeps bad bacteria from taking over.

Normal vaginal discharge

The vagina makes fluid. It is sent out as discharge. This also keeps the vagina healthy. Normal discharge can be clear, white, or yellowish. Most women find that normal discharge varies in amount and color through the month.

An unhealthy environment

The vaginal environment may get out of balance. This may result in a vaginal infection. There are a few reasons this can happen. The pH may have changed. The amount of one organism, such as yeast, may increase. Or an outside organism may get into the vagina and throw off the balance:

- **Bacterial vaginosis (BV).** BV is due to an imbalance in the normal bacteria in the vagina. Lactobacillus bacteria decrease. As a result, the numbers of bad bacteria increase.
- **Candidiasis (yeast infection).** Yeast is a type of fungus. A yeast infection occurs when yeast cells in the vagina increase. They then attack vaginal tissues. A type of yeast called *Candida albicans* is often involved.
- **Trichomoniasis (“trich”).** Trich is a parasite. It is passed from one person to another during sex. Men with trich often don’t have any symptoms. In women, it can take weeks or months before symptoms appear.

Vaginal Infection: Yeast (Candidiasis)

Yeast infection occurs when yeast in the vagina increase and attacks the vaginal tissues. Yeast is a type of fungus. These infections are often caused by a type of yeast called *Candida albicans*. Other species of yeast can also cause infections. Factors that may make infection more likely include recent antibiotic use, douching, or increased sex. Yeast infections are more common in women who have diabetes, or are obese or pregnant, or have a weak immune system.

Symptoms of yeast infection

- Clumpy or thin, white discharge, which may look like cottage cheese
- No odor or minimal odor
- Severe vaginal itching or burning
- Burning with urination
- Swelling, redness of vulva
- Pain during sex

Treating yeast infection

Yeast infection is treated with a vaginal antifungal cream. In some cases, antifungal pills are prescribed instead. During treatment:

- Finish all of your medicine, even if your symptoms go away.
- Apply the cream before going to bed. Lie flat after applying so that it doesn't drip out.
- Do not douche or use tampons.
- Don't rely on a diaphragm or condoms, since the cream may weaken them.
- Avoid intercourse if advised by your healthcare provider.

Should I treat a yeast infection myself?

Discuss with your healthcare provider whether you should use over-the-counter medicines to treat a yeast infection. Self-treatment may depend on whether:

- You've had a yeast infection in the past.
- You're at risk for STDs.

Call your healthcare provider if symptoms do not go away or come back after treatment.