

Vaginal Infections: Yeast or bacteria

Tiny organisms called **microbes** [MY-krohbs] live in every part of the body. There they do important work, helping our bodies digest food, process vitamins, and fight disease.

In the vagina, the right balance of microbes is healthy. But when this balance is upset or some new microbe is introduced, you can end up with a vaginal infection. Vaginal infections are common and usually not serious.

What causes vaginal infections?

Most infections are caused either by microbes like yeast or bacteria.

- **Yeast** [yeest]. It's normal to have yeast in the vagina, but too many yeast organisms can cause an infection. Anything that changes the microbial mix in the vagina, like taking antibiotics, can allow yeast to multiply. So can hormone changes (as happens with pregnancy, menopause, and birth control pills).
- **Bacteria** [bak-TEER-ee-uh]. A bacterial infection can happen when there is a change in the type or number of bacteria in the vagina. Often the problem is too few so-called "good bacteria" and too many of another type of bacteria called anaerobes [AN-uh-rohbs]. Factors that may contribute to this imbalance include douching (rinsing the vagina with a rinsing solution), sex, too-frequent bathing, and having your period.

Keep in mind that vaginal infections from yeast and bacteria are very common. You shouldn't feel embarrassed about talking to your provider about your symptoms. You probably didn't "catch" the infection from a sex partner, and it doesn't mean you're unclean. In fact, most women—more than 75 out of 100—will have at least one vaginal infection in their lifetime.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of a vaginal infection can vary—and some women have no symptoms at all. However, the most common symptom is abnormal vaginal discharge.

To understand what's abnormal for vaginal discharge, you first need to understand what's normal. Normal discharge is usually clear or slightly cloudy. It doesn't have a strong odor and doesn't irritate the skin around the genitals. The amount and consistency can vary—it's normal for discharge to be thinner and watery at some stages of your menstrual cycle, and more thick and sticky at others.

If you have a vaginal infection, your discharge is likely different from the description above. You may have other symptoms, too. Your symptoms may offer a clue as to what is causing your infection. Here are the symptoms commonly seen in yeast and bacterial infections:

Yeast Infection	Bacterial Infection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abnormal discharge: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Is thick and white, like paste or cottage cheese – Has no odor • The vulva is often red • Vaginal area is usually itchy, dry, and sore • May have a burning feeling when you urinate or have sex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abnormal discharge: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Is thin and white or gray (or slightly green) – Has a strong fishy smell • The vulva is usually not red • Vaginal area may be itchy and sore • May have a burning feeling when you urinate or have sex

How are infections diagnosed?

To diagnose a vaginal infection, your healthcare provider will examine you and ask questions about your symptoms. Usually, this provides enough information to make a diagnosis. However, your provider may also collect a sample of cells from your vagina to examine under a microscope.

How is a yeast infection treated?

For a yeast infection, your provider may recommend one or more of the following types of medicine:

- **Pills.** Usually only 1 or 2 pills are prescribed for treatment.
- **Medicated cream.** Your provider may suggest an over-the-counter cream you can buy. Examples include miconazole nitrate (Monistat-7) and clotrimazole (Gyne-Lotrimin, Mycelex-7, Femcare). You put the cream into and around your vagina twice a day for up to 7 days, depending on your symptoms.
- **Suppositories.** A suppository is a small capsule of medicine that you put inside your vagina before going to bed. As your body heat slowly melts the suppository, the medicine is released. (You may want to use a sanitary pad to protect your clothing from any medicine that may leak out.) Continue using the suppositories for as long as your provider has prescribed them—usually 3 to 7 days—even if your period begins.

In addition to medicine, your provider may also suggest that you:

- Take showers instead of baths, and use only unscented soap.
- Don't douche or use any special sprays or powders near your vagina.
- Take extra care to control your blood glucose (sugar) if you have diabetes. High blood glucose boosts yeast growth.
- Follow all of the prevention tips listed at right.

How is a bacterial infection treated?

For a bacterial infection, your provider may:

- Prescribe an antibiotic pill to swallow or an antibiotic cream or gel to insert into the vagina
- Recommend over-the-counter pills, such as acidophilus or probiotic pills, or suggest eating yogurt with live cultures.
- Recommend other products.

All of these treatments can help restore (and maintain) a healthy microbial mix in the vagina. So can following the prevention tips below.

Prevent Vaginal Infections

Keep your genital area cool and dry:

- Wear cotton underwear (cotton allows more air to circulate than nylon or other synthetic materials).
- Don't stay in a wet bathing suit or wet clothes for long periods of time.
- Wash leotards and dance tights frequently.
- Don't wear tight pants or pantyhose every day.

Adopt a sensible approach to feminine hygiene:

- Don't douche unless your provider recommends it. Douching can upset the vagina's microbial balance and may flush harmful bacteria into the upper genital tracts.
- Don't use sprays or other products that promise to "deodorize" or "freshen" your vaginal area.
- Don't use bubble bath, scented or unscented.
- Wash regularly and avoid harsh soap between your legs. A little shampoo is better.

Stay healthy generally:

- Reach and maintain a healthy weight.
- If you have diabetes or pre-diabetes, control your blood glucose.
- Eat a healthy diet that includes yogurt with live cultures.
- Limit your number of sex partners.
- Be alert to signs of infection. It's common to have more infections after your first. If you suspect an infection, contact your healthcare provider.

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