

Vaginal Discharge:

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Introduction:

Most women will assume that a vaginal discharge is due to 'thrush' which is caused by a fungus called *Candida Albicans*. However, there is another common discharge called bacterial vaginosis caused by multiple bacteria in the vagina.

To understand why you would develop a problematic discharge one needs to know about the normal physiology of the vagina. It is a warm, moist environment with a Ph of 3.5-4.2. There are also organisms such as 'lactobacilli' present which are the healthy bacteria. Under certain conditions the normal flora in the vagina is altered and you will then develop an itchy, smelly or irritable discharge.

It is therefore important to visit your doctor to make a proper diagnosis so that you can be treated appropriately. This will also avoid recurrences.

What constitutes a normal discharge?

This is usually minimal and is derived from the cervix and vaginal mucosa, under the influence of estrogen. It is transparent and mucoid-like and might be increased during ovulation. This is referred to as physiological leucorrhoea and this may occur at the time of puberty.

What is vaginal candidiasis?

- You will have a very itchy cottage-cheese like discharge, whitish in colour and associated with vulval itching (that means around the vaginal area along the labia). *Candida* is normally found in the vagina but under certain condition its role changes from a commensal to a pathogen. It is treated with antifungal tablets or vaginal ovules and in some cases your doctor will prescribed an antifungal cream to be applied around the vaginal area.

What are the causes of recurrent Candida infection?

- Undiagnosed diabetes
- Oral contraceptive pill
- Depressed immune system
- Overuse of antibiotics
- Untreated partner- a symptomatic partner must be treated

Recurrent Candida infection occurs in about 5% of women. It is referred to as recurrent after you have had 4 or more infections per year.

Important : The use of yoghurt in the vagina, tea tree-oil, vinegar and garlic is not substantiated by medical evidence, although it is reported to alleviate the symptoms. Aloe vera is also reported to soothe itching.

How to prevent recurrent 'thrush'?

- Do not clean the inside of the vaginal or douch out of habit!
- Avoid foods rich in carbohydrates e.g. rice, roti's, pasta, breads, mushrooms and different types of cheese.
- Avoid the use of tight fitting underwear and fragrant deodorants.
- Avoid intercourse during treatment.

What is Bacterial Vaginosis?

- In this case you will have a greyish-white discharge associate with a fishy-smell. You might notice this frequently after intercourse and after menstruation since the Ph of the vagina is altered by menstrual blood and prostatic fluid. This discharge can cause pelvic inflammatory disease and also preterm labour, preterm rupture of membranes and endometritis (infection of the lining of the womb after birth). It is treated with oral antibiotics or an intravaginal antibiotic gel.

How is the diagnosis made by the doctor?

A vaginal swab will be done-a small cotton-bud is inserted into the vagina to get some discharge and it is sent off to the lab for testing i.e a microscopy, culture and sensitivity test.

Note that any intermenstrual abnormal discharge might not be the usual vaginal discharge described above and needs to be checked by your doctor!

A discharge in a child must also be checked by your doctor!

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