

GIRL TALK

Our doctors shed light on one of the most common feminine hygiene concerns



What causes an itchy vulva or vagina?

The causes of an itchy vulva or vagina may be infective or non-infective. Most common vaginitis include bacterial vaginosis, candidiasis (or yeast infection), trichomoniasis, chlamydia and gonorrhoea. The non-infectious type is usually due to allergic reactions.

What are the symptoms, and when should I visit a doctor?

Symptoms may vary and it is possible to have multiple infections at the same time. You could also have an infection without any symptoms.

A normal vagina produces discharge that is usually clear or slightly cloudy-white. It is usually not smelly or itchy. How much of it and exactly what it looks and feels like can vary during your menstrual cycle.

When the discharge has a very noticeable odour, or burns or itches, an infection is highly likely. Symptoms

may be worse at night. Having sex can also make some symptoms worse.

You should see your gynaecologist when: your vaginal discharge changes colour, is heavier, or smells different; you notice itching, burning, swelling, or soreness around or outside of your vagina; it burns when you pee; and having sex is painful.

How do I get it?

Candidiasis and bacterial vaginosis, which are related to the organisms that live in your vagina, are two of the most common causes. They can have very similar symptoms. Candidiasis is an overgrowth of the yeast that you normally have in your body. Bacterial vaginosis happens when the balance of bacteria is thrown off. With both conditions, you may notice white or greyish discharge. If there's a fishy smell, bacterial vaginosis is a better guess. If your discharge looks like cottage cheese, a yeast infection may be to blame. That's also more likely to cause itching and burning, though bacterial vaginosis might make you feel itchy, too. You may have both at the same time.

You can get vaginal infections such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea, herpes simplex virus, human papilloma virus (HPV), genital warts and trichomoniasis through sexual contact. Women may not have obvious symptoms of these sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Sometimes itching, burning, and even discharge happen without an infection. Most often, it's an allergic reaction to or irritation from products such as detergents, douches, fabric softener, perfumed soaps, etc. It could also be from a lower level of hormones because of menopause or because you've had your ovaries removed. This condition, called atrophic vaginitis, can make your vagina dry. Sexual intercourse may be painful, and you may notice vaginal itching and burning.

In rare cases, diabetes, thyroid problems and skin disorders may cause the itch as well.

What are the treatments available?

The key to treating vaginitis effectively

is getting the right diagnosis. Pay close attention to exactly which symptoms you have and when. Be ready to describe the colour, texture, smell, and amount of discharge. It is best to see your gynaecologist rather than trying over-the-counter medications. If you're sexually active, especially if you have multiple partners, you should talk to your gynaecologist about getting tested at your annual check-up since some women may not have symptoms. Cervical cancer screening is also advised. If left untreated, these infections can permanently damage your reproductive organs or cause other health problems. ○

TIPS ON FEMININE HYGIENE

- Avoid douching.
- Wear loose cotton underwear. Clothes such as tights, cycling shorts, leggings or tight jeans should be avoided. Wear loose-fitting trousers or skirts and replace tights with stockings.
- Avoid soaps, shower gel, scrubs, bubble baths, deodorants, baby wipes or douches in the vulval area.
- Some over-the-counter creams including baby or nappy creams, herbal creams (e.g. tea tree oil, aloe vera) and 'thrush' treatments may include possible irritants.
- Avoid wearing panty liners or sanitary towels on a regular basis.
- Avoid antiseptic (as a cream or added to bath water) in the vulval area.
- Wear white or light colours of underwear. Dark textile dyes (black, navy) may cause an allergy; if you wash new dark underwear a few times before wearing it, it will be less likely to cause a problem.
- Avoid coloured toilet paper.
- Avoid wearing nail varnish on fingernails if you tend to scratch your skin.



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