

factsheet

COMMON VAGINAL & VULVAL CONDITIONS

There are a number of conditions that can affect your vulva (the outside part of the female genitals) and vagina. Some are uncomfortable, others can be painful and irritating. Most can be easily treated. Sometimes vaginal and vulval symptoms can be due to other more serious causes - if your symptoms do not get better, make sure you see your doctor for a check-up.

What is normal vaginal discharge?

All vaginas have a natural vaginal discharge which keeps them healthy. The amount of discharge varies from person to person. At different times in your period, or if you use hormonal contraception, it can be heavier or lighter, and sometimes you won't notice it at all. After menopause there may be less vaginal discharge. If your normal vaginal discharge changes, this could mean you have a problem such as an infection.

How do I know if I have a vaginal infection?

You might notice:

- an increase in the amount of vaginal discharge or an unusual or unpleasant smell
- itching, burning or soreness around the vaginal area
- pain when you pass urine
- pain when you have sex

If you have any of these symptoms you could have one of the vaginal conditions described below. Other possible causes of vaginal symptoms include sexually transmissible infections (STIs) such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea or trichomonas.

You should get medical help as soon as you notice any changes in your vaginal smell or discharge, especially if you are pregnant.

Bacterial vaginosis (BV)

This common condition is caused by a change in the bacteria that keep the vagina healthy - some people will notice an unpleasant strong, fishy smell and/or a white or grey watery discharge. Those who get bacterial vaginosis often notice the symptoms can come and go or can be associated with their periods. If you are pregnant and have bacterial vaginosis, it is important to get treatment.

If left untreated, this condition during pregnancy can cause the baby to be premature (born early). It is also important to treat bacterial vaginosis if you are having a procedure involving the uterus, such as an IUD insertion.

Treatment usually involves oral antibiotic tablets or vaginal antibiotic cream or gel for 5-7 days.

Bacterial vaginosis can often recur after treatment. There is new evidence that treatment of regular male partners can reduce recurrence.

Douching (washing and cleaning inside the vagina with water or hygiene products) should be avoided as it can cause vaginal infections.

Vagina thrush (candida)

Thrush is a common infection of the vagina caused by yeast that is found in the vagina, mouth and bowel. The yeast usually causes no problems because it is kept in balance by other organisms that normally live in the body and on the skin. If this natural balance is upset (for example by pregnancy, diabetes or some medications), overgrowth of the yeast can result.

Thrush symptoms include a thick, white discharge that smells yeasty but not unpleasant. The area around the vagina and vulva can be red, itchy and sore. Thrush is not an STI - your sexual partner/s do not need to be treated. It's not necessary to avoid sex, although sex may be uncomfortable while you have the infection. Although thrush is common, it is not the only thing that can cause itchiness or pain in the vagina - your doctor or nurse will check that the symptoms are from thrush and not some other condition.

The most common treatments for thrush are vaginal creams or vaginal tablets (pessaries) that you get from the chemist without a prescription - you should see your doctor if the itchiness and pain doesn't go away or comes back again after treatment. Please note, vagina treatments may impair the integrity of condoms. Your doctor may suggest an oral antifungal treatment - this is available without a prescription.

If the infection keeps coming back you may need a longer course of antifungal treatment which is prescribed by your doctor.



Vulval dermatitis

Dermatitis is a very common cause of irritation around the vaginal entrance - the main symptom is usually itching, but if it scratched the skin can tear or split and this can also cause burning and stinging.

Dermatitis can be caused by anything that irritates the sensitive skin around the entrance to the vagina - detergents, panty liners, perfumed toilet papers and pads, soaps, perfumes, bubble baths, shower gels, vaginal deodorants, lubricants and spermicides. Dermatitis can also be caused by an allergy, perhaps to the latex in some condoms, to tea-tree oil, or to one of the ingredients in vaginal creams or pessaries – in these cases you will often also have other allergic conditions like asthma, hay fever or eczema.

Avoid anything that may be irritating the genital skin. A gentle unperfumed moisturiser like aqueous cream may be advised by your doctor. Soap substitutes are usually recommended as well. A weak steroid ointment is often used to treat mild symptoms - ointments are a bit messier to use than creams but they cause less irritation and are longer lasting. Sometimes a stronger steroid ointment or cream is needed for a short time when symptoms are more severe. Using a cold moist compress can help to relieve the symptoms and antihistamine tablets can be useful when the cause is an allergy.

Other more serious vulval skin conditions can be associated with itching, pain or irritation so it is always important to have a check-up with a doctor if the symptoms do not improve.

What can I do to keep my vagina & vulva healthy?

- wear cotton or silk underwear and change daily
- wash underwear in hypoallergenic laundry detergent and double rinse to remove any irritants
- change out of damp swimming costumes or sports clothes as soon as possible
- use tampons or menstrual cups instead of sanitary pads or panty liners
- if using pads or panty liners, change them regularly
- period underwear is preferable to pads/liners

- avoid tight fitting clothes such as jeans/leggings/tights/pantyhose - this creates a moist, warm environment that encourages the overgrowth of bacteria and yeasts
- use water or soap substitutes to wash the area
- never douche - douching increases your risk of vaginal irritation and infection
- avoid using soap, bubble bath, bath salts, or other perfumed or deodorised products around the vagina - never ever use anything harsh such as disinfectants, even diluted, near your vagina
- a gentle moisturiser may be advised
- always wipe from the front to the back after going to the toilet to prevent germs and bacteria being swept into the vagina - don't use perfumed toilet paper

For more information

- Visit your nearest Family Planning Australia clinic fpnsw.org.au/clinics
- Chat to a nurse via Talkline – 1300 658 886 or fpnsw.org.au/talkline
- National Relay Service (for people who are d/Deaf, hard of hearing or have speech communication difficulties) – 133 677
- Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) – 131 450
- NSW Sexual Health Infolink – www.shil.nsw.gov.au or 1800 451 624
- Melbourne Sexual Health Clinic – Bacterial vaginosis information and treatment guidelines mshc.org.au/sexual-health/bacterial-vaginosis