



Vaginal Health: What Every Woman Should Know

The Healthy Vagina: A normal, healthy vagina is acidic in nature (pH<4.5). This environment is created and maintained by normally occurring bacteria. A healthy vagina also produces secretions to cleanse and regulate itself, similar to how saliva cleanses and regulates the environment of the mouth. These vaginal secretions are considered normal vaginal discharge. Any interference with the delicate balance of normal vaginal bacteria (normal flora) and normal secretions can contribute to vaginal irritation and/or infection.

Normal Vaginal Discharge: All women have *some* vaginal discharge. Normal discharge may appear clear, cloudy white, and or yellowish when dry on clothing. It may also contain white flecks and at times may be thin or stringy. Changes in the usual discharge can occur for many reasons, including the menstrual cycle, emotional stressors, nutritional status, pregnancy, medications (including birth control pills) and sexual arousal.

Vaginitis: This term means irritation of the vagina. Vaginitis is quite common and it can occur for a variety of reasons such as an allergic reaction to soap/bubble bath or the latex in condoms, a yeast infection, bacterial vaginosis, a sexually transmitted infection, or a variety of other vaginal conditions/disorders. If you have vaginitis—don't be embarrassed or afraid to seek help from a health care provider.

Indications of Vaginitis / Vaginal Infection: Any variation in the color or amount of discharge from what you see normally may be a sign of a vaginal infection. If you experience any of the problems listed below make an appointment with a health care provider:

- Vaginal discharge that is out of the ordinary for you
- Itching (mild to severe), soreness, pain with or without a rash or sores
- Burning on skin during urination
- White, clumpy discharge (somewhat like cottage cheese)
- Grey/white or yellow/green discharge and/or vaginal discharge with a foul odor.

Prevention and Treatment Guidelines

- Wear 100% cotton underwear; do not wear thong underwear
- Use condoms consistently and correctly, especially with new partners
- Stay healthy; eat nutritious food, be physically active, get adequate sleep, drink plenty of fluids
- Keep vaginal area clean and dry; shower daily
- Always wipe from front to back after toileting
- Avoid using scented pads or tampons
- DON'T DOUCHE—this changes the normal flora and can lead to vaginitis
- Don't scratch or rub infected or inflamed areas; it can cause even more irritation
- If uncomfortable the following may help: cool tap water external rinses, tub soaks, cold packs, over the counter plain vaginal lubricant or a small amount of petroleum jelly, and sedating antihistamines at bedtime (i.e. Bedadryl).
- Avoid perfumed or scented soaps and body washes
- If having persistent vaginitis: use low irritant laundry soaps, avoid fabric softener, rinse underwear twice
- During an infection, use pads instead of tampons if menstruation occurs
- Use any prescribed medication for treatment of vaginitis for as long as directed by your health care provider
- Don't have sex until all treatment is completed
- If symptoms continue, return to the health care provider that treated you; a different treatment may be needed.

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