

FAQs Vaginitis

Frequently Asked Questions

Overview

What is vaginitis?

Vaginitis is an [inflammation](#) of the [vagina](#) . Vaginitis may cause itching, burning, a bad odor, or a large amount of discharge. It is one of the most common reasons for visiting an [obstetrician–gynecologist \(ob-gyn\)](#) . There are many possible causes of vaginitis, and the type of treatment depends on the cause.

Common types of vaginitis include

- [yeast infections](#)
- [bacterial vaginosis \(BV\)](#)
- [trichomoniasis](#)
- [atrophic vaginitis](#)

What can cause vaginitis?

The vagina contains many organisms, such as [bacteria](#) and yeast, that are important to its normal function. A change in the normal balance of either yeast or bacteria can result in vaginitis. This causes the lining of the vagina to become inflamed. Factors that can change the normal balance of the vagina include

- [antibiotics](#)

- changes in [hormone](#) levels during pregnancy, breastfeeding, or [menopause](#)
- douching
- [spermicides](#)
- [sexual intercourse](#) (vaginal sex)
- infection

How is vaginitis diagnosed?

To diagnose vaginitis, your ob-gyn should take a sample of the discharge from your vagina. Several tests may be done. Some test results may be available right away. For others, the sample must be sent to a lab, and results are ready in a few days.

To ensure the results of the tests are accurate, do not use any vaginal medications for at least 3 days before you see your ob-gyn. You also should not douche, have sex, or use spermicides before your visit.

How is vaginitis treated?

Treatment depends on the cause of the vaginitis. Treatment may be a pill, cream, or gel that is inserted into the vagina.

It is important to follow treatment directions exactly, even if the symptoms go away before you finish the medication. Even though the symptoms disappear, the infection could still be present. Stopping the treatment early may cause symptoms to return.

If symptoms do not go away after the treatment is finished, or if they come back, see your ob-gyn. A different treatment may be needed.

How can vaginitis be prevented?

There are a number of things you can do to reduce the risk of getting vaginitis:

- Do not use feminine hygiene sprays or scented tampons.
- Do not douche. It is better to let the vagina cleanse itself.
- Use plain warm water to clean the vulva. Soaps and detergents can change the normal balance of organisms inside the vagina.

- Thoroughly clean diaphragms, cervical caps, and spermicide applicators after each use.
- Use condoms during sex.
- Check with your ob-gyn about preventing yeast infections if you are prescribed antibiotics for another type of infection.

Yeast Infections

What is a yeast infection?

Yeast infection is also called [candidiasis](#) . It is one of the most common types of vaginitis.

What causes yeast infections?

Yeast infections are caused by a fungus called Candida. It normally is found in small numbers in the vagina. But when the balance of bacteria and yeast in the vagina is altered, the yeast may overgrow and cause symptoms.

What factors increase the risk of getting a yeast infection?

- Antibiotics—Some types of antibiotics increase the risk of a yeast infection. The antibiotics kill normal vaginal bacteria, which keep yeast in check. The yeast can then overgrow.
- Pregnancy—Changes in the body's hormone levels during [pregnancy](#) can increase the risk.
- [Diabetes mellitus](#) —Having [diabetes](#) can also increase your risk of yeast infection.
- Conditions that affect the immune system—Yeast can overgrow if the immune system, which protects the body from disease, is not working well. For example, in people infected with [human immunodeficiency virus \(HIV\)](#) , yeast infections may be severe. They may not go away, even with treatment, or may recur often.

In many cases, the cause of a yeast infection is not known.

What are the symptoms of a yeast infection?

The most common symptoms of a yeast infection are itching and burning of the [vulva](#) . The burning may be worse with urination or sex. The vulva may be red and swollen.

Sometimes yeast infections cause an increase or change in vaginal discharge. Discharge may be white, lumpy, and have no odor. Sometimes there is no change in discharge.

What treatments are available for vaginal yeast infection?

Yeast infections can be treated either by placing medication into the vagina or by taking a pill. In most cases, treatment of male sex partners is not necessary.

Should I use an over-the-counter medication to treat a yeast infection?

Over-the-counter treatments are safe and often effective. But you may think you have a yeast infection when you actually have another problem. In this case, a medication for a yeast infection will not work. It may also cause a delay in proper diagnosis and treatment of the actual problem.

Even if you have had a yeast infection before, it may be a good idea to call your ob-gyn before using an over-the-counter medication to treat your symptoms. If this is the first time you have had vaginal symptoms, you should see your ob-gyn. If you have used an over-the-counter medication and your symptoms do not go away, see your ob-gyn.

Bacterial Vaginosis

What is bacterial vaginosis (BV)?

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) not an infection. It is a condition caused by an imbalance in the types of normal bacteria that live in the vagina.

What are the symptoms of BV?

The main symptom is increased discharge with a strong fishy odor. The odor may be stronger during your [menstrual period](#) or after sex. The discharge is usually thin and dark or dull gray, but it may have a greenish color. Itching is not common, but there may be itching if there is a lot of discharge.

How is BV treated?

Several different antibiotics can be used to treat BV, including metronidazole and clindamycin. They can be taken by mouth or inserted into the vagina as a cream or gel. Sexual partners do not need to be treated.

When metronidazole is taken by mouth, it can cause side effects in some patients. These include nausea, vomiting, and darkening of the urine. Do not drink alcohol when taking metronidazole. The combination can cause severe nausea and vomiting.

BV often recurs. It may require repeated treatment. In some cases, longer treatment for 3 to 6 months may be needed.

Trichomoniasis

What is trichomoniasis?

Trichomoniasis is a condition caused by the microscopic parasite *Trichomonas vaginalis*. It is a [sexually transmitted infection \(STI\)](#). If you have trichomoniasis, you are at increased risk of infection with other STIs.

What are the symptoms of trichomoniasis?

Signs of trichomoniasis may include a yellow-gray or green vaginal discharge. The discharge may have a fishy odor. There may be burning, irritation, redness, and swelling of the vulva. Sometimes there is pain during urination.

How is trichomoniasis treated?

Trichomoniasis is treated by taking metronidazole pills. Sexual partners must be treated so that you do not get infected again. You should not have sex until you and your partner have finished treatment.

Atrophic Vaginitis

What is atrophic vaginitis?

This condition is not caused by an infection, but it can cause vaginal discharge and irritation. It may develop when hormone levels are low, such as during [breastfeeding](#) and after [menopause](#). When it happens around the time of menopause, it is called [genitourinary syndrome of menopause](#) .

What are the symptoms of atrophic vaginitis?

Symptoms include dryness, itching, and burning. Other symptoms include abnormal vaginal discharge and [pain during sex](#).

How is atrophic vaginitis treated?

Atrophic vaginitis is treated with [estrogen](#) that is applied inside the vagina. It is available as a cream, tablet, or ring. A water-soluble lubricant may also be helpful during sex.

Glossary

Antibiotics: Drugs that treat certain types of infections.

Atrophic Vaginitis: A noninfectious condition linked to a lack of estrogen. Vaginal symptoms may include tissue changes, itching, burning, irritation, discharge, dryness, or inflammation.

Bacteria: One-celled organisms that can cause infections in the human body.

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV): A condition in which the normal balance of bacteria is changed by an overgrowth of other bacteria. Symptoms may include vaginal discharge, fishy odor, pain, itching, and burning.

Candidiasis: A type of vaginal infection caused by the overgrowth of a fungus. Also called a yeast infection.

Diabetes Mellitus: A condition in which the levels of sugar in the blood are too high.

Estrogen: A female hormone produced by the ovaries.

Genitourinary Syndrome of Menopause (GSM): A collection of signs and symptoms caused by a decrease in estrogen and other sex hormones. Signs and symptoms can include vaginal dryness, pain with sex, bladder symptoms, frequent urinary tract infections (UTIs), burning, itching, and irritation.

Hormone: A substance made in the body by cells or organs that controls the function of cells or organs.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV): A virus that attacks certain cells of the body's immune system. If left untreated, HIV can cause acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Inflammation: Pain, swelling, redness, and irritation of tissues in the body.

Menopause: The time when a woman's menstrual periods stop permanently. Menopause is confirmed after 1 year of no periods.

Menstrual Period: The monthly shedding of blood and tissue from the uterus.

Obstetrician–Gynecologist (Ob-Gyn): A doctor with special training and education in women's health.

Sexual Intercourse: The act of the penis of the male entering the vagina of the female. Also called "having sex" or "making love."

Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI): An infection that is spread by sexual contact. Infections include chlamydia, gonorrhea, human papillomavirus (HPV), herpes, syphilis, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, the cause of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome [AIDS]).

Spermicides: Chemicals (creams, gels, foams) that inactivate sperm.

Trichomoniasis: A type of vaginal infection caused by a one-celled organism that is usually transmitted through sex.

Vagina: A tube-like structure surrounded by muscles. The vagina leads from the uterus to the outside of the body.

Vulva: The external female genital area.

Yeast Infections: Infections caused by an overgrowth of a fungus. Symptoms may include itching, burning, and irritation of the vulva or vagina and a thick, white discharge.

If you have further questions, contact your ob-gyn.

Don't have an ob-gyn? [Learn how to find a doctor near you.](#)

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