

► VAGINITIS ◀

What is vaginitis?

Vaginitis is an inflammation of the vagina, due most often to infection. If you have vaginitis, your vaginal tissues may become red, swollen and irritated. You may feel a burning or itching sensation, and may notice an abnormal discharge and odor.

While vaginitis may make you uncomfortable, it is usually not serious. Although treatable, vaginitis rarely disappears on its own. Because different things can result in vaginitis, your doctor will need to determine the cause before treating your condition.

What causes vaginitis?

Your vagina is a muscular tube connecting your uterus with the outside of your body. Normally, your vagina harbors microscopic organisms that keep the vagina naturally acidic and forms a barrier against infection. If something happens to change the acidity of the vagina, however, harmful microorganisms may grow out of control, causing the symptoms of vaginitis—itching, irritation, swelling, redness and abnormal discharge.

If your general resistance to disease has been lowered by stress, illness, lack of sleep or poor diet, for example, you may be particularly vulnerable to vaginal infections. In addition, some sorts of vaginal infections can be transmitted during sexual intercourse.

What causes the acidity of the vagina to change?

Many things can alter the level of acidity in your vagina. For example, if you take antibiotics for another disease, the microscopic organisms responsible for maintaining the acid level in your vagina may be destroyed. As a result, your vagina becomes less acidic. Diabetes and pregnancy also affect vaginal acidity to a lesser degree.

Physical things can change vaginal conditions. For example, tampons or douching can irritate the vaginal walls. Tight slacks and panties without a cotton crotch can result in vaginitis.

What is “abnormal” discharge?

Your vagina cleanses itself by means of secretions that form normal vaginal discharge. This discharge ranges from clear to cloudy, and has no odor. Normal vaginal secretions are usually limited in quantity, so production of a stain on underwear is sometimes abnormal. Abnormal discharge usually has a distinctive odor, and is often accompanied by itching, burning or irritation.

How is vaginitis treated?

Treatment depends on what specific organism is responsible for your case of vaginitis. In order to treat you effectively, your healthcare

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professional will need to determine the exact cause of your problem. Although self-treatment for vaginitis, especially yeast infections, is common, studies suggest that as many as 60 percent of women who treat themselves for a yeast infection are treating the wrong thing.

If you notice any of the symptoms of vaginitis, make an appointment to see your physician. Your doctor will examine your vagina and take a sample of the vaginal

discharge for examination under a microscope. Because the discharge contains important clues to the cause of your condition, do not douche or use vaginal medication before seeing your doctor.

If the examination reveals that you have a vaginal infection, your doctor will prescribe appropriate medication. If your vaginal tissues have become irritated for a different reason, your doctor will tell you how to alleviate your problem.

What kinds of vaginal infections cause vaginitis?

The three most common types of vaginal infections are bacterial vaginosis, candidiasis and trichomoniasis. The symptoms for each of these infections differ as well as the treatments.

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis is caused by the rapid growth of several different types of bacteria. The infection may cause an abnormal discharge with an unpleasant odor; however, up to 50 percent of patients may have no abnormal signs or symptoms. Bacterial vaginosis responds promptly to antibiotics, such as metronidazole and clindamycin. In the United States, bacterial vaginosis is the most common form of vaginitis.

What is candidiasis?

Candidiasis, also known as yeast or fungus infection, is another common cause of vaginitis. Pregnant, obese and diabetic women and women taking antibiotics or birth control pills are particularly vulnerable to candidiasis. Candidiasis causes an inflammation of the vaginal walls, with itching, redness and irritation, sometimes accompanied by a white, odorless discharge. If you have candidiasis, your doctor may prescribe oral medication or medication in the form of vaginal creams, gels or suppositories to destroy the yeast and restore the vagina to its normal state.

Candidiasis can be persistent and may recur. If you have recurrent infections, talk to your doctor and take the medication that your doctor prescribes. Recurrent infection may require more intensive evaluation and therapy to get them under control.

What is trichomoniasis?

Trichomoniasis is an infection that can affect both the vagina and the urinary tract. Trichomoniasis is most often transmitted sexually. If you have this kind of infection, you may have an abnormal, yellow-green, foul-smelling discharge and a burning sensation, especially when you urinate. The symptoms may grow more severe around the time of your menstrual period.

Most often, trichomoniasis is cured effectively and rapidly with a medicine called metronidazole. Your doctor may prescribe one large dosage, or smaller doses taken over seven days. If you take metronidazole, you should not drink any alcoholic beverages. Some people experience side effects to the drug that may include nausea and darkening of the urine. To avoid re-infection, your doctor will recommend that your sexual partner be treated at the same time.

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It is important to understand that sexually-transmitted infections sometimes “cluster” together. This means that if you have trichomoniasis (or “trich”), you may also have other more serious sexually-transmitted infections, such as gonorrhea, chlamydia or even HIV (AIDS). Your doctor can perform tests for these infections and provide treatment if necessary.

What else might be causing my vaginitis?

In addition to these infections, vaginitis may stem from other causes. Certain chemicals, such as those found in bubble bath and feminine hygiene sprays, can irritate vaginal tissue. So can improper use of tampons, tight clothing and non-cotton underwear. With the lack of estrogen stimulation after menopause, vaginal tissue grows thin and dry. This makes the vagina more vulnerable to injury and irritation, causing an inflammation called atrophic vaginitis.

How can I prevent vaginitis?

If you have repeated bouts with vaginitis, make a special effort to keep your vaginal area clean.

To prevent bacteria from spreading from the bowel and rectum to the vagina, wipe from front to back after a bowel movement. Clean the area around the vagina and vulva by washing daily, keeping the area as dry as possible. “Breathable” cotton underwear, or underwear with a cotton crotch, allows moisture to evaporate; other fabrics trap moisture that harbors harmful bacteria. Avoid tight clothing, which also traps moisture.

Take a break from tampons when you have your period. Use a sanitary pad for at least part of every 24-hour period.

Avoid unnecessary substances which might irritate delicate vaginal tissue. Irritants include feminine hygiene sprays, harsh soaps, perfumed toilet paper and tampons with deodorants. Avoid douching.

Take good care of yourself. Good general health will make you more resistant to vaginitis.

What if I think I have vaginitis?

While vaginitis will not go away by itself, it does respond to proper medical treatment. Don't try to treat yourself with home remedies, and don't use old prescriptions. Make an appointment to see your healthcare professional as soon as you notice any of the symptoms of vaginitis. The earlier you begin treatment, the quicker you will be rid of your infection. Be sure to finish all your medication, and to follow instructions carefully.

*For an appointment with a Jefferson physician, more information or health information and education programs, please call **1-800-JEFF-NOW** (1-800-533-3669) or visit our web site at **www.JeffersonHospital.org***

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Link to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists: www.acog.org