



## Vaginal Yeast Infections

### **Fact:**

75% of women will have a vaginal yeast infection at some time.

### **Fiction:**

It's a myth that the first infection can be treated with over-the-counter drugs.

### **Prevention:**

A healthy lifestyle can go a long way toward preventing these infections.

### **Treatment:**

Most vaginal yeast infections respond well to medication.

Most women have at least one vaginal yeast infection during their lifetime.

## Understanding Yeast Infections

Vaginal yeast infections, also called Candida infections, typically are caused by the *Candida albicans* fungus. With yeast infections, something kills off healthy probiotic bacteria, thereby allowing *Candida* or other microorganisms to overgrow. Common causes include:

- Antibiotics. When an antibiotic medication kills off bad bacteria, it can also kill friendly bacteria, allowing a yeast infection to flourish. Even the presence of antibiotics in milk means that milk consumption makes it harder to fight a yeast infection.
- Diet. *Candida* feed on sugar, so a diet heavy in sugars and simple carbohydrates encourage a bloom of yeast.
- Alcohol. In excess, alcohol kills off friendly bacteria, and high levels in the blood actually feed yeast.
- Hormone imbalances. Imbalances that show up as obvious symptoms can increase the tendency to yeast infections.
- Bowel problems. Constipation, diarrhea and other bowel problems can lead to as well as result from yeast infections.
- Stress and irregular sleep. *Candida* is one infection clearly linked to the mind/body connection. Bodies under stress get more infections.
- Immune deficiency. Conditions that weaken the immune system such as AIDS, cancer and herpes promote yeast overgrowth.

## Who Gets Yeast Infections?

During a lifetime, 75% of all women are likely to have at least one vaginal *Candida* infection, and up to 45% have two or more. Women tend to be more susceptible to vaginal yeast infections if their bodies are under stress from poor diet, lack of sleep, illness, or when they are pregnant or taking antibiotics. Women with immune-suppressing diseases such as diabetes and HIV infection are also at increased risk.

## Symptoms of Yeast Infections

The symptoms of a vaginal yeast infection include:

- Vaginal itch and/or soreness
- Thick, white discharge

- Burning discomfort around the vaginal opening, especially if urine contacts the area
- Pain or discomfort during sexual intercourse.

A doctor should be consulted for vaginal discomfort or an abnormal vaginal discharge, especially in pregnancy.

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## Prevention

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The following may help prevent vaginal yeast infections:\*

- Keeping the external genital area clean and dry
- Avoiding irritating soaps (including bubble bath), vaginal sprays and douches
- Changing tampons and sanitary napkins frequently
- Wearing loose cotton (rather than synthetic) underwear that doesn't trap moisture
- Changing quickly into dry clothes after swimming
- Taking antibiotics only when prescribed
- If diabetic, keeping tight control over blood sugar levels
- Reducing stress, eating right, and getting enough sleep

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## Diagnosis and Treatment

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Diagnosis begins with a pelvic examination and may include taking a sample for examination under a microscope in the office or at a laboratory.

Antifungal medication can be inserted directly into the vagina. A single dose of oral medication is also available. Proper treatment cures up to 90% of vaginal yeast infections within two weeks or less, often within a few days. A small number of people will have repeat infections. Many unexplained episodes suggest testing for diabetes or HIV, two conditions that can compromise the immune system.

Generally, vaginal yeast infections are not transmitted sexually. However, if a male sex partner shows redness, irritation and/or itching at the tip of the penis, he may need to be treated with an antifungal cream or ointment.

Although many medications used to treat vaginal yeast infections are now available over-the-counter, these medications should be used only for treating repeat infections, not for the first episode. For the first infection, a doctor should rule out sexually transmitted diseases that can cause similar symptoms.

About 5% of women with vaginal yeast infections develop recurrent vulvovaginal candidiasis (RVVC). Although RVVC is more common in women with diabetes or weakened immune systems, women with RVVC may have no underlying medical cause. Generally, this is treated with a period of oral medication.

\* IntelliHealth

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