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Yeast Infection

Vaginal yeast infections (also called yeast vaginitis or vaginal candidiasis) are a common problem in women. The most common symptoms are itching and irritation of the vulva and around the opening of the vagina. Vaginal yeast infections usually occur as infrequent episodes, but can recur frequently and may cause chronic persistent symptoms.

Yeast infections occur mainly in women who are menstruating (having monthly periods). They are less common in postmenopausal women who do not use estrogen-containing hormone therapy and they are rare in girls who have not yet started menstruating.

Vaginal Yeast Infection Symptoms

The most common symptoms of a yeast infection include:

- Itching or irritation of the vulva and around the vaginal opening (figure 1)
- Pain with urination,
- Vulvar soreness or irritation
- Pain with intercourse
- Reddened and swollen vulvar and vaginal tissues.
- Some women have no abnormal vaginal discharge. Others have white clumpy (curd-like) or watery vaginal discharge.

Symptoms of a yeast infection are similar to a number of other conditions, including bacterial vaginosis (a bacterial infection of the vagina), trichomoniasis (a sexually transmitted infection), and dermatitis (irritated skin). It is often not possible to know if itching is caused by yeast or other causes without testing.

Vaginal Yeast Infection Causes

The fungus that causes yeast infections (named Candida) lives in the gastrointestinal tract and sometimes the vagina. Normally, Candida causes no symptoms. However,

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when there are changes in the environment of the gastrointestinal tract and vagina (which can be caused by medicines, injury, or stress to the immune system), Candida can overgrow and cause the symptoms described above.

Vaginal Yeast Infection Risk Factors

In most women, there is no underlying health problem that leads to a yeast infection. There are several risk factors that may increase the chances of developing an infection, including:

- **Antibiotics:** Most antibiotics kill a wide variety of bacteria, including those that normally live in the vagina. These bacteria protect the vagina from the overgrowth of yeast. Some women are prone to yeast infections while taking antibiotics.
- **Hormonal contraceptives (eg, birth control pills, patch, and vaginal ring):** The risk of yeast infections may be higher in women who use birth control methods that contain the hormone estrogen.
- **Contraceptive devices:** Vaginal sponges, diaphragms, and intrauterine devices (IUDs) may increase the risk of yeast infections. Spermicides do not usually cause yeast infections, although they can cause vaginal or vulvar irritation in some women.
- **Weakened immune system:** Yeast infections are more common in people who have a weakened immune system due to HIV or use of certain medications (steroids, chemotherapy, post-organ transplant medications).
- **Pregnancy:** Vaginal discharge becomes more noticeable during pregnancy, although yeast infection is not always the cause.
- **Diabetes:** Women with diabetes are at higher risk for yeast infections, especially if blood sugar is not well controlled.
- **Sexual activity:** Vaginal yeast infections are not a sexually transmitted infection. They can occur in women who have never been sexually active, but are more common in women who are sexually active.

Vaginal Yeast Infection Diagnosis

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To diagnose a yeast infection, your doctor will examine your vulva and vagina. He or she will also swab the vagina to get a sample of discharge, which will be examined under a microscope in a lab. Do not begin treatment at home until your doctor or nurse has confirmed that you have a yeast infection.

Women with vulvar itching or vaginal discharge often assume that their symptoms are caused by a yeast infection and try to treat it themselves using over-the-counter medications. However, in one study, only 11 percent of women accurately diagnosed their infection; women with a previous yeast infection were only slightly more accurate (35 percent correct). Diagnosing and treating yourself wastes money (on non-prescription treatment), wastes time (you will not feel better until you use the right treatment), and can make you more itchy and irritated. For these reasons, it's important to see your doctor to confirm that you actually have a yeast infection before beginning treatment.

Vaginal Yeast Infection Treatment

Vaginal treatment: Treatment for a vaginal yeast infection often includes a vaginal cream or tablet. You apply the cream or tablet inside the vagina at bedtime with an applicator. There are prescription and non-prescription treatments, so ask your doctor which to use. One, three, and seven-day treatments are equally effective. The length of treatment depends on how severe your infection is.

Oral treatment: A prescription pill called fluconazole is another option for treating yeast infections. Most women only need one dose, although women with more complicated infections (such as those with underlying medical problems, recurrent yeast infections, or severe signs and symptoms) may require a second dose 72 hours (three days) after the first dose.

Most yeast infections go away within a few days of starting treatment. However, you may continue to feel itchy and irritated, even after the infection is gone. If you do not get better within a few days after finishing treatment, call your doctor for advice.