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Normally, every woman has mucus discharge from her vagina. This discharge helps keep the vagina moist and clean. Normal discharge is clear or beige, has no odor, and causes no irritation. There may be more abundant, thinner discharge during ovulation and sticky, thicker, opaque discharge just before the menstrual period. But sometimes a change in the normal discharge may be a sign of vaginal infection.

Vaginal infections are unpleasant and aggravating, but they are curable. Most women will have a vaginal infection at some time during their lives. Rarely, vaginal infections can be an early sign of a more serious problem. If your symptoms include severe abdominal pain or pain with urination, please call Kaiser Permanente right away to make an appointment.

Types of infections

Most vaginal infections are one of three types: Monilia (Yeast), Trichomoniasis, or Bacterial Vaginosis. Symptoms of these infections may include redness, swelling, irritation, itching, and an unusual discharge or odor.

- **Monilia (yeast) infection** is caused by a species of fungus called *Candida*. *Candida* thrives in moist, wet areas. Although *Candida* is normally present in the vagina, infections occur when the fungus begins to multiply excessively. Symptoms usually include a thick, white “cottage cheese”-like discharge and burning, itching, or swelling of the outer vaginal area.

Antibiotics, birth control pills, diabetes, and pregnancy are all associated with an increased likelihood of yeast infections. Yeast infections are common. Approximately 75 percent of women will have at least one yeast infection in their lives.

- **Trichomoniasis** is caused by a parasite. It is primarily passed by sexual contact or, rarely, by using towels, spas, or clothing used by a person who has Trichomoniasis. Symptoms include a frothy yellow or green discharge, irritation or a mild burning sensation, and sometimes a foul smell.
- **Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)** is caused by an overgrowth of some types of normal vaginal bacteria, or skin or bowel bacteria that enter the vagina through sexual contact or improper wiping. These bacteria include *Gardnerella*, *Mobiluncus*, and *Mycoplasma*. Symptoms include a thin white or grayish discharge with a strong ammonia-like or fishy odor, irritation or itching. It could also include pain in the lower belly, as well as pain during urination or sex.

Treatment

- The first time you have any symptoms, you should discuss your symptoms with your physician or nurse practitioner so that the infection can be treated correctly.
- Simple yeast infections can be treated effectively with over-the-counter (OTC) products such as miconazole or clotrimazole vaginal cream. Prescription items are only needed for yeast infections if the symptoms do not respond to an OTC product. This does not necessarily mean that the OTC product was ineffective. (See “Repeated infections” below.) These creams are safe to take during pregnancy.
- Other types of vaginal infections usually require prescription medications. Trichomoniasis is usually treated with metronidazole pills. BV is usually treated with metronidazole or clindamycin pills or cream. If you receive a prescription, take the medication until it is all gone. In some infections such as Trichomoniasis, your partner(s) will also need to be treated. Remember that people may be infected even if they have no symptoms at all.
- Avoid genital contact or use condoms during treatment until the infection is gone for both of you, because partners can re-infect each other. You may wish to avoid sex during this time as the inflammation from the infection can make sex uncomfortable.
- If you are pregnant, consult your doctor or other health care professional before taking any medication.

Repeated infections

Repeated infections do not necessarily mean that your medication didn't work. It may mean:

- The medication worked, but you were re-infected.
- The medication worked, but the *Candida* began to over-multiply again.
- You may have high blood sugar. Yeast infections can be a sign of diabetes. Discuss this possibility with your health care practitioner.
- Your symptoms might not have been from an infection to begin with. Some women can develop itching and skin inflammation from allergies or irritation from certain soaps, bubble baths or feminine hygiene products.

Preventing vaginal infections

There are many things you can do to help keep your vagina healthy.

- Wash the outside of your genital area daily with a gentle soap and warm water, and then dry thoroughly. Washing keeps the vaginal area clean and helps reduce bacteria and fungi.
- Always wipe your genital area with a downward motion, from the front to the back. This method keeps bacteria from your rectum from entering your vagina.
- Use only your own towels and washcloths.

- Avoid bubble baths, dish detergent, or other chemicals in bath water that may irritate your vagina. Similarly, avoid using feminine hygiene sprays or perfumed toilet tissue. Don't use deodorant tampons and pads.
- Tight jeans, wet bathing suits, nylon underpants, and pantyhose hold heat and moisture. Wear looser clothing, cotton underpants, and pantyhose with cotton crotches.
- Do not douche or use other home remedies. These can upset the natural chemical balance of the vagina. If you douche, do so no more than once a month with one or two tablespoons of vinegar in one quart of warm water. The next time you see your doctor or other health care professional, discuss your reasons for douching.
- Clean sex toys between use with gentle soap and warm water.

When To Call Kaiser Permanente

Be sure to call your doctor or other health care professional if you:

- Develop lower abdominal pain and a fever higher than 101° F (38.33° C) along with a vaginal discharge. This may indicate pelvic inflammatory disease (PID).
- Are pregnant and have symptoms of a vaginal infection or a urinary tract infection (UTI).
- Have pain during sex or urination.

- Continue to have symptoms despite home treatment with a nonprescription medication.
- Have symptoms return within 2 months, and you have not been taking antibiotics.

For more information

- Visit kp.org/womenshealth to learn more about Vaginal Yeast Infections, Trichomoniasis, or Bacterial Vaginosis as well as other common conditions.
- See the chapter on Women's Health in your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*. If you do not already have a copy, contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Department or Center.

Other Web sites

- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists at acog.org
- Planned Parenthood at plannedparenthood.org
- The National Women's Health Information Center at 4woman.gov
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases–National Institutes of Health at niaid.nih.gov Search for “Vaginal Infection” or “Vaginitis”.

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.