

# Vaginal Discharge

**Fluid coming from a woman's vagina is called vaginal discharge. It is normal for a woman to have vaginal discharge throughout her menstrual cycle, but a discharge that is different to normal may be a sign of an infection or other problem. Describing your discharge will help a doctor or pharmacist to choose the best treatment for you.**

Before puberty, girls normally have no vaginal discharge, unless they have vaginal irritation or infection. After puberty, oestrogen (a female hormone) causes the vagina to produce secretions that keep it moist and clean. These secretions leave the vagina as a vaginal discharge. After menopause, oestrogen levels fall and vaginal discharge decreases.

## Normal vaginal discharge

The type and amount of a woman's normal vaginal discharge changes during her menstrual cycle. Straight after a menstrual period the discharge is white, thick and sticky. Around ovulation, more discharge may be produced, and it is clearer, slippery and stretchy. After ovulation, the discharge becomes white, thick and sticky again. Most women

notice more discharge at times of sexual arousal and during pregnancy. Women taking the contraceptive pill may notice less discharge. Normal vaginal discharge usually has little or no smell.

## Abnormal vaginal discharge

An increase in the amount of vaginal discharge for no obvious reason or vaginal discharge that looks abnormal or smells unpleasant may be a sign that something is wrong.

Causes of abnormal vaginal discharge include:

- Infections
  - Bacterial vaginosis
  - Thrush (candidiasis)

- Sexually transmissible infections (e.g., trichomonas, chlamydia, gonorrhoea)
- Something left in the vagina too long (e.g., tampon, broken condom)
- Allergy or irritation from something put into the vagina (e.g., condoms, creams, cleansers).

## Bacterial Vaginosis

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is the most common cause of abnormal vaginal discharge.

### Symptoms

The main symptom of BV is an abnormal vaginal discharge. The discharge is usually:

- More than normal
- A white-grey colour
- Watery
- Fishy smelling, often stronger after sex
- Less acidic than normal.

BV may cause itch and soreness in and around the vagina, but these symptoms are not common.

Some women have only mild BV and do not notice any symptoms.

### Cause

BV is caused by a change in the balance of bacteria living in the vagina. Lactobacillus are the main type of bacteria living in a normal, healthy vagina. Lactobacillus are harmless and they help protect the vagina by producing a mild acid that stops

the overgrowth of harmful bacteria. Lactobacillus give the vagina a normal acidity level of pH less than 4.5 (pH is a measure of acidity). The balance of bacteria living in the vagina can be upset by a variety of things, leading to BV. In BV, the number of lactobacillus is lower, the number of other bacteria is higher and there is a decrease in the acidity of the vagina (pH is higher than 4.5).

Things that increase the risk of getting BV include new or many sex partners, intrauterine contraceptive devices (IUDs) and vaginal douches (washouts).

### Treatment

Non-pregnant women with mild symptoms may not need treatment. BV may clear without treatment, but symptoms often return, even after treatment, if the acidity of the vagina is not corrected. The acidity of the vagina can be tested using a vaginal pH tester.

BV can be treated with:

- Antibiotics (oral tablets/capsules or vaginal cream)
- Special vaginal products to restore the normal acidity of the vagina.

Ask a doctor or pharmacist about testing vaginal pH, and treating BV.

## Vaginal Thrush

Thrush is the second most common cause of abnormal vaginal discharge.

## Symptoms

The main symptoms of vaginal thrush are itching and soreness in and around the vagina. Other symptoms are:

- Redness and swelling in and around the vagina
- A white, usually thick vaginal discharge, with little or no smell
- Pain when passing urine
- Pain during intercourse.

The acidity of the vagina usually remains normal.

## Cause

Thrush is an infection caused by a fungus called candida. Small numbers of candida usually live harmlessly in the vagina, but under certain conditions, candida can increase and cause thrush. Things that increase the risk of getting vaginal thrush include antibiotic use, diabetes, a weakened immune system, pregnancy and wearing synthetic underwear.

## Treatment

Vaginal thrush can be treated with:

- One capsule (swallowed) of antifungal medicine (avoid if pregnant or breastfeeding)
- Antifungal cream or pessaries inserted into the vagina.

Ask a doctor or pharmacist about treating vaginal thrush.

## Important

Consult a doctor or pharmacist if you

- Have a change in the colour, smell or amount of your vaginal discharge
- Have bleeding or spotting at a different time to your period
- Have itching, irritation, swelling, pain or sores in or around your vagina.
- Are under 16 or over 60 years of age and have a vaginal discharge
- Are or could be pregnant and have an unusual vaginal discharge
- Continue to have vaginal symptoms after treatment
- Have more than 3 thrush infections in a year

**Note:** Abnormal vaginal discharge with abdominal pain and/or fever may be due to an infection that needs urgent treatment.

## Self Care

To reduce your risk of vaginal problems:

- Don't use vaginal douches (washouts) or deodorants
- Don't get shampoos, soaps or antiseptics in your vagina (e.g., while bathing)
- Wear loose fitting cotton underwear
- Dry your genital area well after showers, baths, swimming
- After going to the toilet, wipe from front to back using a clean piece of toilet paper each time.

## For more information

### **A doctor**

Listed under 'Medical Practitioners' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

### **Healthdirect Australia**

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### **National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information**

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### **The Poisons Information Centre**

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.  
Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.*

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