Vaginal infections: Thrush & Bacterial vaginosis

Looking after your sexual health
This leaflet gives you information about thrush and bacterial vaginosis and how to get treated.

Vaginal infections

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Thrush is a very common cause of unusual vaginal discharge: three out of four women will have thrush at some point in their lives.

Thrush is caused by a number of factors. It is not a sexually transmitted infection, but can sometimes be passed from one person to another through sexual contact.

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is another very common cause of unusual vaginal discharge which one in three women will get at some time. It has a number of causes.

What is thrush?
Candida albicans is a yeast that lives harmlessly on the skin and in the mouth, gut and vagina. Normally it is kept under control by harmless bacteria. Occasionally, however, conditions change and the yeast increases rapidly causing symptoms. This is commonly known as thrush, or thrush infection.

How does thrush develop?
Your chances of developing a thrush infection are increased if you:

* are pregnant
• wear restrictive clothing (such as tight jeans) or synthetic clothing (such as nylon underwear) that prevents ventilation
• are taking certain antibiotics
• have diabetes
• are unwell or ill
• use products that may cause irritation, such as vaginal deodorant or too much perfumed bubble bath
• have sex with someone who has thrush.

Thrush can be passed to a sexual partner if you have vaginal, anal or oral sex, by using fingers during foreplay or by sharing sex toys.

What are the signs and symptoms of thrush infection?
Some people will not have any signs or symptoms at all, and may not be aware they have a thrush infection.

If you do get symptoms you might notice:

Women
• Itching, soreness and redness around the vagina, vulva (the lips around the opening to the vagina) or anus (the opening to the back passage)
• a thick, white discharge from the vagina that may look rather like cottage cheese and smells yeasty, but not unpleasant
• pain when passing urine
• pain when having sex.

Men
• irritation, burning or itching under the foreskin or on the tip of the penis
- redness, or red patches, under the foreskin or on the tip of the penis
- a thick discharge, something like cottage cheese, under the foreskin
- difficulty in pulling back the foreskin.

What can I do if I think I have a thrush infection?
You can have a test as soon as you have signs or symptoms for the doctor or nurse to look at.

You can go to a genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinic, a sexual health clinic or to your GP. If your GP doesn’t offer testing, they will refer you to a clinic that does.

Some treatments are available from a pharmacist (see page 6).

What does the test involve?
A doctor or nurse will use a swab to collect a sample of cells. They may also ask you to give a urine sample. There are many myths about how swabs are done. A swab looks a bit like a cotton bud, but is smaller, soft and rounded. The swab is wiped over the parts of the body that could be affected and easily picks up samples of discharge and cells. It only takes a few seconds and is not usually painful, though it may be uncomfortable for a moment. Swabs may be used to pick up cells from:
- the vagina and cervix (entrance to the womb), during an internal examination in women
- the genital area
- the foreskin.

Samples taken during the examination are looked
at under a microscope to check for thrush infection. In some clinics, the result is available immediately. In others a sample is sent to a laboratory for testing, and the result is usually available within a week.

Tests for thrush infection are usually very accurate in women. They are less accurate in men, so diagnosis is often made on appearance alone.

Sometimes thrush will be noticed during a routine cervical smear test, but you will only need treatment if you have problems with discharge or itching. Routine blood tests do not detect infections such as thrush.

What is the treatment for thrush infections?
Treatment is simple for both men and women.
You may be given some antifungal cream, pessaries, pills or a combination. The doctor or nurse will advise you how to use the treatment. The cream is applied externally to the genital area. A pessary is usually an almond-shaped tablet which a woman puts high up into her vagina. Some antifungal products can weaken latex condoms, diaphragms and caps, which should not be used during treatment.

You can also buy some antifungal treatments from pharmacies: these are useful for anyone who is sure they have thrush infection and wants to self-treat. The pharmacist will be able to advise if you have any questions, or are unsure how to use the treatment.

You should tell the doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you are, or think you might be, pregnant or if you are breastfeeding. This will influence the type of treatment that is given to you.
Some complementary therapies such as tea tree oil gel or live plain yoghurt may help with vaginal thrush.

**How effective is the treatment?**

Antifungal cream, pessaries or pills are usually effective if you use them according to instructions. You may be advised to avoid sex during treatment, to help the thrush infection clear up more quickly. If the first treatment doesn’t work, the doctor or nurse may suggest another, or a combination of treatments. Some people may only get one episode of thrush; others may get frequent episodes. If this happens, it is important to get medical advice and not to self-treat (for example, some other conditions, such as diabetes, can be the cause of recurrent thrush). If you get repeated episodes of thrush, it might be worth your partner being tested and treated too.

Different people find different triggers cause vaginal thrush infection. If you notice a pattern, maybe there is something you can do about it. For example:

- Avoid wearing tight, restrictive or synthetic clothing, such as tights, nylon underwear, leggings, lycra shorts, and tight jeans or trousers.
- Use pads rather than tampons during a period. Some pads may suit you better than others.
- Avoid perfumed soap, bubble bath, genital sprays and deodorants, and any other irritants such as disinfectants.
- Avoid douching (washing out the vagina with water or any other liquids or chemicals).
- Make sure the vagina is well lubricated before sexual intercourse.