



Vaginal discharge in adult women – when to be concerned

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In women of childbearing age, the vagina naturally produces a discharge, which changes consistency at particular times of the menstrual cycle, sometimes being watery and sometimes being thicker, but usually being mucous-like and mostly odourless. It is normal to have about 2 to 5 ml of white or clear vaginal discharge every day. Diet, sexual activity, medication and stress can, however, affect the volume and nature of vaginal discharge. Women who are menopausal normally have minimal vaginal discharge because of their lower levels of oestrogen.

Some women may worry about these natural secretions and think that they have an infection. However, some vaginal discharge is normal, unless it occurs with other symptoms, such as itching, burning or an odour.

Causes of abnormal vaginal discharge

The most common infective cause of vaginal discharge is vaginal thrush (candidiasis). Vaginal thrush may be (but is not always) associated with a discharge. The discharge is usually cream-coloured, thick and curd-like in appearance but, alternatively, may be thin and rather watery. Other vaginal infections may be responsible for causing a discharge, but the discharge is quite different from that caused by vaginal thrush. The discharge associated with vaginal thrush does not usually produce an unpleasant odour. In contrast, the discharge produced by a bacterial vaginal infection (e.g. bacterial vaginosis, chlamydia or gonorrhoea) leads to a

discharge that may be described as yellow or greenish and usually has a bad or strong odour.

Broad-spectrum antibiotics wipe out the body's natural bacterial flora (lactobacilli) in the vagina and can predispose to overgrowth of the organism that causes thrush, usually *Candida albicans*. Some women find that an episode of vaginal thrush follows every course of antibiotics that they take.

Other causes of a vaginal discharge may be the body's reaction to a foreign body (such as a forgotten tampon or condom) in the vagina or a substance (such as soap or bath products). Abnormal vaginal discharge may be more likely to develop in women who practise certain habits, such as those who use:

- Douches
- Pantyliners every day
- Feminine hygiene products
- Bubble baths or other scented bath products
- Tight or restrictive underwear e.g. thongs or synthetic underwear

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When to seek help from the doctor or clinic for a vaginal discharge

Vaginal discharge that presents with the following signs and symptoms should be referred to the doctor:

- Itching of the vulva, vaginal opening or labia
- Redness, burning, soreness or swelling of the vulva
- Foamy or greenish-yellow discharge

- Bad odour
- Blood-tinged vaginal discharge
- Pain with sexual intercourse or with urination
- Abdominal or pelvic pain

Girls who have not started menstruating and women over the age of 60 years who present with a new vaginal discharge should also be referred to the doctor or clinic.

Simple steps to maintain vaginal health

Healthy habits for women to maintain vaginal health include:

- Use water or unscented non-soap cleanser to wash genitalia, use warm (not hot) water and the hand (not a washcloth)
- Rinse genitalia with water and/or pat dry after toileting; avoid use of baby wipes or scented toilet paper
- Wipe genitalia from the front to the back after passing a stool
- Do not douche or use feminine hygiene products
- Avoid hot baths with scented bath products
- Wear cotton underwear

A word on the treatment of vaginal discharge

Many women would prefer to avoid seeing their healthcare provider for a vaginal discharge and may opt for self-treatment. However, self-treatment with an inappropriate product can delay making the right diagnosis, be costly or can even cause worsened symptoms. In particular, women should be advised not to douche if they have a discharge as this practice can make the discharge worse if it is caused by an infection.

Women who have previously had an episode of vaginal thrush may be able to recognise the symptoms and may be treated with an over-the-counter antifungal vaginal cream or pessary, containing clotrimazole, miconazole or econazole. However, if there is any doubt as to the cause of the vaginal discharge, the patient is best referred to the healthcare provider for assessment.

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