

VAGINAL INFECTIONS

General Information

Knowing the symptoms, causes and types of vaginitis is very important because the discomfort caused by vaginitis can lead to lost days from school or work, cessation of sexual activity, and infection of one's sexual partner. Persistent vaginitis may be an indication of more serious health problems such as diabetes or a suppressed immune system (which could be a warning sign of HIV or AIDS).

What is vaginitis?

Vaginitis is an inflammation of the vagina. In addition, vulvovaginitis involves inflammation of the external parts of female genital organs. Causes of vaginitis include infection, changes in hormonal balance, mechanical irritation, and allergic reactions. Vaginitis is often uncomfortable and can become very painful.

What are the symptoms?

You may experience an abnormal discharge, as well as itching, burning, pain or irritation upon urination and during intercourse. However, sometimes a routine checkup indicates the presence of vaginitis without overt symptoms.

Is all vaginal discharge a sign of vaginitis?

No, since the vagina is a "self-cleaning" organ, it naturally generates discharge. Normal discharge is transparent or cloudy-white, generally has little odor and causes no irritation. The amount and consistency of the discharge may vary according to a particular woman's phase of menstrual cycle, her psychological condition and her state of sexual arousal.

The vagina of a healthy woman contains many organisms that coexist in normal balance. When there is an excess of certain organisms, an abnormal discharge accompanied by an unusually strong and unpleasant odor may result.

How common is vaginitis?

Vaginitis accounts for over 50 percent of all gynecologic office visits in the U.S. Proper medication and finishing the entire prescription are often necessary to fully eliminate the cause vaginitis. However, despite the effectiveness of the medication, vaginitis can return.

Are there different types of vaginal infections?

Vaginal infections are classified by the three major types: candida, bacterial vaginosis and trichomonas. Of these, candida (also known as "yeast infection"), is the cause of 20 to 40 percent of all cases of infectious vaginitis. It is also the most recurrent form of vaginal infection.

What is candida?

Candida is a yeast-like fungus that is normally present in harmless quantities in the mouth, digestive tract and vagina, as well as on the skin. Under certain conditions, candida can become more infectious and multiply rapidly. Up to 15 percent of adult women carry candida organisms without experiencing any symptoms.

How would you know if you had a yeast infection?

The discharge caused by candida infection is sometimes white and thick. The odor is usually not unpleasant and there is burning and external itching. A woman may have a yeast infection and not learn about it until her doctor diagnoses it. Typically the diagnosis involves microscopic examination of the vaginal discharge.

How serious are yeast infections?

Yeast infections are mainly uncomfortable. However, the irritation caused by yeast can break the integrity of skin and can increase the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. For any woman diagnosed with a yeast infection, quick, safe and efficient treatment is important.

What is trichomonas vaginitis?

Trichomonas vaginitis is responsible for between 10 and 20 percent of all cases of infectious vaginitis. It is caused by a parasitic organism that is sexually transmitted.

What are the signs of trichomonas vaginitis?

Women with trichomonas vaginitis usually have a profuse vaginal discharge that is green-yellow in color, and sometimes foul-smelling. Itching, burning, and possible painful urination are other symptoms.

What is bacterial vaginosis and what are its symptoms?

Bacterial vaginosis is a bacterial infection characterized as having an offensive, fishy odor with minimal vaginal inflammation. The discharge is usually abundant in amount, is thin, foamy, gray to white in color, and adheres to the vaginal walls. Many women who have this condition are tempted to douche; however, douching can send these bacteria higher up into the uterus. This could contribute to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) and subsequent infertility problems.

What other factors can contribute to vaginitis?

Stress, poor diet, lack of sleep, or the use of certain antibiotics can all upset the delicate balance of "nature" in the vagina. Cuts or abrasions to the vagina, intercourse without sufficient lubrication, and wearing tight-fitting clothing may also contribute to the development of vaginitis. Frequent douching or using a harsh vaginal deodorant can dry and irritate the vaginal membranes as well as increase the discharge.

Prevention

What you can do to lower your risk of getting vaginitis

- Do not use feminine hygiene sprays or scented or deodorant tampons. Do not try to cover up a bad odor - it could be a sign of infection that should prompt you to see your doctor.
- Do not douche. It is better to let the vagina cleanse itself and re-establish normal flora.
- Thoroughly clean diaphragms, cervical caps, and spermicide applicators after each use.
- Use condoms during sex.
- Check with your doctor about preventing yeast infections if you are taking antibiotics for another type of infection.

You can make an appointment at the SHS Women's Clinic by calling (858) 534-8089.