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Vaginal Thrush

Definition

Vaginal thrush is a common infection caused by an overgrowth of *Candida albicans* yeast, which lives naturally in the vagina.

Description

Candida albicans yeast lives naturally in the bowel and in small numbers in the vagina. It is mostly harmless, but symptoms can develop if yeast numbers increase. It can also be recurrent. About 75 per cent of women will have vaginal thrush in their lifetime. Other names for this infection are candidiasis or monilia. Thrush can also affect men. See the Thrush and Men topic for more information.

Cause

Vaginal thrush is caused by an overgrowth of the yeast *Candida albicans*. This overgrowth may be due to:

- Antibiotic use
- Oral contraceptive use
- Diabetes
- Pregnancy
- Menstrual cycle changes
- General illnesses like diabetes, iron deficiency and immune system disorders
- Associated vulval skin conditions.

Sometimes, the reason for candida overgrowth cannot be identified. Vaginal thrush is not a sexually transmitted infection (STI) but in some cases it can be passed on during sex. If you have thrush it is advisable to avoid having sex until you have completed a course of treatment and the infection has cleared up.

Signs and symptoms

Symptoms you may experience if you develop vaginal thrush include:

- Vaginal discomfort – itching or burning
- A thick, white discharge with a 'cottage cheese' appearance and yeasty smell
- Redness or swelling of the vagina or vulva
- Stinging or burning while urinating or during sex
- Splits in the genital skin.

Treatment options

Suggested solutions

General

- » Anti-fungal cream

Natural

- » Acidophilus
- » Garlic supplement



As with any medical condition it is advisable to consult your GP for an accurate diagnosis and treatment. Even if you have the symptoms of vaginal thrush for the first time it is advisable to see your GP. This is because the symptoms of vaginal thrush are sometimes similar to those of a sexually transmitted infection. Your Doctor will know how to tell the difference.

To give you an accurate diagnosis your GP will need to ask you some questions about your symptoms. In some cases your GP may need to;

- Examine your genitals
- Take a swab from the affected area.

In some cases, symptoms only last for a short time and resolve without treatment. If treatment is required, the aim is to reduce the number of yeasts so they no longer cause symptoms. Options that are available from your local Pharmacist without a script include:

- Antifungal creams or vaginal pessaries (tablets) – these are put inside the vagina with a special applicator and are used from one to six days, depending on the instructions. Occasionally a second course of treatment is required. Repeated topical treatments (applied to the skin) may occasionally cause skin irritation.
- Oral tablets – these are called fluconazole (or itraconazole with a script from your GP) and are designed to be swallowed. Oral treatments are more convenient than pessaries and creams, but they can have side effects. They tend to be used only for troublesome thrush that keeps recurring. If you are on other medications or are pregnant, consult with your Doctor or Pharmacist before taking fluconazole or itraconazole.

Diet hints

Certain dietary measures can be taken to minimise the growth of yeast in the bowel which, in turn, reduces the likelihood of Thrush.

- Try to avoid foods high in simple carbohydrate such as refined sugars as Thrush thrives on sugar. These foods include fruit juices, sucrose, biscuits, cakes made from white flour and sugar, honey, white breads and pastries etc.
- Eat plain yoghurt which contains live cultures of acidophilus. This yoghurt can also be applied directly to the vagina to relieve itchiness.
- Try to include foods high in fibre such as wholegrain cereals, fruits and vegetables, psyllium and oat bran.
- Try to limit (but not completely eliminate) foods high in carbohydrates such as potatoes, and fruits such as oranges, kiwi fruit, pineapple, lemons and limes, grapefruit, tomatoes. Re-introduce these foods slowly after about 1 month of treatment.
- Garlic is a natural antibiotic and can be included in the diet every day. It is best to have garlic at a separate time to acidophilus as the antibiotic activity of garlic may interfere with the acidophilus organism.

Prevention

To help prevent vaginal thrush:

- Wipe your bottom from front to back after going to the toilet. This will prevent the spread of *Candida albicans* from the anus to the vagina.
- Wash your vaginal area with water and avoid perfumed soaps, shower gels, vaginal deodorants, or douches. Soap substitutes can be used. Sorbolene (with or without glycerine) is probably the cheapest and is very effective. When using sorbolene:
 - Avoid perfumed products.
 - Be aware that products containing 10 per cent glycerine can occasionally cause stinging.
 - Apply before the area is wetted and rinse off lightly. A slight greasy film should remain.
 - Avoid using antiseptics, douches or perfumed sprays in the genital area.

- Avoid using perfumed toilet papers and menstrual products.
- Avoid wearing tight-fitting pants and synthetic underwear.
- Use an alternative to latex condoms, spermicidal creams or lubricants if they irritate your genital area. Ask your Pharmacist for advice.
- Consider changing your clothes-washing detergent and avoid using fabric softeners.

Vitamins/minerals/herbs

- Acidophilus bifidus supplementation may help as it feeds and promotes the growth of good bacteria.
- Garlic in cooking or capsule form, may be of benefit due to its anti-microbial and anti-fungal effect. Garlic is particularly effective against Candida albicans.
- Vitamin C and bioflavonoids promote the body's immunity and help protect the body against damaging toxins released from candida.
- Pau d'arco herb is thought to be an anti-bacterial and anti-fungal agent.
- Golden Seal herb may soothe and decrease inflammation of the mucous membranes. It also has an anti-bacterial action and is thought to help the immune system. Golden seal is also thought to help support the liver and digestive system.

Notes

It is important to remember that thrush rarely occurs in post-menopausal women unless they are on hormone replacement therapy (HRT). This is because the candida species thrives in the presence of oestrogen. Post-menopausal women with vaginal irritation should immediately consult their medical practitioner.

Organisations & support groups

For more help and information contact: Cystitis and Candida, 75 Mortimer Road, London, 1 5AR
Tel:- 020 7249 8664.

Pharmacist's advice

Ask your Pharmacist for advice.

- 1) Follow the Diet Hints
- 2) There are several **antifungal creams or vaginal pessaries (tablets)** available. These may be suggested by your Pharmacist to relieve Thrush. Ask for advice.
- 3) **Oral tablets (fluconazole)** are also available for the treatment of thrush. Ask your Pharmacist about the suitability of this treatment for you.
- 4) Oral tablets (itraconazole) are available with a script from your GP. Be aware that oral tablets for the treatment of thrush can cause side effects.
- 5) Avoid bathing too often and using **perfumed soap** as this can aggravate the condition and increase the risk of Thrush. Ask your Pharmacist about appropriate soaps and washes.
- 6) Wear **loose cotton clothing** and underwear to keep the genitals cool and well ventilated. Women prone to Thrush should avoid wearing pantyhose. Stockings are a better choice as these allow air circulation.
- 7) Increasing the **acidity** of the vagina may help to prevent Thrush. Washing with a preparation of water and vinegar may help to achieve this. Ask your Pharmacist about a **gel** which can be applied to the area as a preventative measure against Thrush.
- 8) After using the toilet, always wipe from the vaginal area towards the anus. The Thrush organisms which live outside the anus are easily transferred to the vagina.
- 9) If the dietary intake is inadequate, consider the nutritional supplements recommended in this topic.

DISCLAIMER : This information is an educational aid only. It is not intended to replace medical advice for individual conditions or treatments. Talk to your doctor, pharmacist, nurse or naturopath before following any medical regimen to see whether it is safe and effective for you.