

Patient Information Leaflet - Vaginal Health

The Healthy Vagina

The vagina is actually very good at taking care of itself - if left to its own devices! It contains a healthy population of bacteria (called lactobacilli) which keep the environment slightly acidic. Things can go wrong if anything happens to disrupt this normal, healthy balance - common causes include antibiotics, overwashing, douching or the use of strong soaps, shower gels and vaginal deodorants. It is normal for women to have a variable amount of vaginal discharge, which is usually white or clear. This may increase just before a period or during pregnancy. There are a number of common minor infections which can affect the vagina: this often causes a change from the normal type of discharge - it may become more strong-smelling, yellow or frothy. The discharge may occur with some external soreness, itching, burning or cracks in the skin.

Genitourinary Medicine and Sexual Health clinics can offer IMMEDIATE + ACCURATE DIAGNOSIS of all vaginal infections. The commonest vaginal infections are:

- Vaginal candidiasis ("thrush")
- Bacterial vaginosis
- Trichomoniasis ("TV")

VAGINAL CANDIDIASIS ("THRUSH")

This is caused by a yeast which 10% of all women carry in the vagina. Most of the time, it causes no problems, but under certain conditions (and in a small group of women who seem to get troublesome, recurrent "thrush" for no apparent reason) the yeast multiplies in the vagina and causes symptoms. Although your male partner may experience some soreness on his penis if you have very active "thrush", sexual transmission is not thought to be important in causing "thrush" in women.

- **Symptoms**
Itching, burning, soreness and occasionally swelling around the vulval area - Vaginal discharge (sometimes)
- **Diagnosis**
A sample is taken gently from the side wall of the vagina and examined under the microscope whilst you are in the clinic - this allows an immediate diagnosis and treatment can be started without delay. Another swab will be sent off to the laboratory for culture confirmation, the result of which comes back in 3-7 days.
- **Treatment**
There are various options - usually a single-dose pessary or concentrated vaginal cream is used. Sometimes a weaker antifungal cream is also given, to soothe the skin externally. Some women choose to take tablets by mouth to clear the infection. It is best to stop using soap for a while and to wear loose, cool clothing - or no underwear at all. Treatment of your sexual partner is not required, unless they have symptoms.

For the small group of women who experience very frequently recurring vaginal candidiasis, there are particular approaches which have been shown to help, including regular use of antifungal pessaries to **prevent** recurrences.

BACTERIAL VAGINOSIS

This is almost as common as "thrush", but often goes unrecognised. It is caused by a change in the balance of bacteria in the vagina. Bacteria which are usually present in small numbers multiply and take over from the healthy lactobacilli. It tends to occur in women who are in sexual relationships, but is not thought to cause any problems for partners. Current research

is studying the effects of this common infection in pregnancy - some evidence suggests that it may be associated with premature labour.

- **Symptoms**
Grey, watery discharge with an offensive odour - NO soreness or itching usually
- **Diagnosis**
A sample of the discharge is taken and its acidity measured. It is then examined under the microscope whilst you are still in the clinic - this allows immediate confirmation of the diagnosis and treatment can be started.
- **Treatment**
There are several options. A single-dose of antibiotic (usually Metronidazole) can be given; this is about 85% effective. Other options are a week's course of antibiotics given either in tablet form by mouth, or sometimes a vaginal cream -these options are over 95% effective. Your partner does **not** need treatment.

TRICHOMONIASIS ("TV")

This is an infection caused by a small parasite. It may also cause infection in the urethra ("water passage") in both women and men. It is usually sexually transmitted.

- **Symptoms**
 - There may be no symptoms.
 - Thin, yellow, frothy discharge.
 - Irritation and soreness around the vaginal area.
 - Pain on passing urine.
- **Diagnosis**
A sample of the discharge is examined under the microscope (Called a Wetmount Preparation). This again allows an instant diagnosis and treatment.
- **Treatment**
This is usually a single dose of Metronidazole, an antibiotic. If you suspect you may be pregnant, tell your doctor before accepting this treatment.

Your partner should also be treated and you should both back for a repeat examination about a week later.