

## Vaginal Discharge

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familydoctor.org editorial staff



## What is vaginal discharge?

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Glands inside your vagina and cervix make small amounts of fluid. This fluid flows out of the vagina each day, carrying out old cells that have lined the vagina. Vaginal discharge is completely normal. This is your body's way of keeping your vagina healthy and clean.

## Symptoms of vaginal discharge

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Vaginal discharge is usually clear or milky and doesn't smell bad. The color and thickness of the discharge change with your monthly cycle. The discharge is thicker when you ovulate (when one of your ovaries releases an egg), when you breastfeed, or when you're sexually excited.

## What changes may be a sign of a problem?

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Changes that may signal a problem include an increase in the amount of discharge, a change in the color or smell of the discharge, and irritation, itchiness, or burning in or around your vagina. This is called vaginitis. A discharge that's stained with blood when you're not having your period could also be a sign of a problem. If you have any of these signs, you should talk to your doctor.

You should also be on the lookout for symptoms of yeast infections, bacterial vaginosis, and trichomoniasis, 3 infections that can cause changes in your vaginal discharge.

### Signs of yeast infections

- White, cottage cheese-like discharge
- Swelling and pain around the vulva
- Intense itching
- Painful sexual intercourse

### Signs of bacterial vaginosis

- A white, gray, or yellowish vaginal discharge
- A fishy odor that is strongest after sex or after washing with soap
- Itching or burning
- Slight redness and swelling of the vagina or vulva

### Signs of trichomoniasis

- A watery, yellowish, or greenish bubbly discharge
- An unpleasant odor
- Pain and itching when urinating
- Most apparent after your period

# What causes vaginal discharge?

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Vaginal discharge is a completely normal part of how your body maintains a healthy vagina. But changes can occur if the normal balance of healthy bacteria (germs) in your vagina is upset. Many things can disturb the balance of a healthy vagina, including:

- douching
- feminine hygiene sprays
- certain soaps or bubble baths
- antibiotics
- diabetes
- pregnancy
- infections

## How can douching be harmful?

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The chemicals in douches may irritate your vagina and change the normal balance of germs in your vagina. Douching can also spread an infection into the uterus, increasing your risk of getting pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID is an infection of the fallopian tubes that can cause you to be unable to have children.

Douching isn't necessary to keep your body clean. Smells you may notice usually come from outside the vagina (vulva). Keeping this area clean with gentle soap and water can prevent smells.

# How is vaginal discharge diagnosed?

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If your vaginal discharge increases, changes color or odor, or is suddenly itchy or irritated, see your doctor. You may have a yeast infection, bacterial vaginosis, or trichomoniasis. Your doctor will need to examine you to make a diagnosis. The exam will include questions about your symptoms. Your doctor will also perform a pelvic exam to look for swelling and discharge.

## What is a yeast infection?

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Small amounts of yeast fungus are often found in a healthy vagina. But if too much grows, it can cause a yeast infection. Yeast infections usually aren't caught from a sex partner. You may be more likely to get a yeast infection if you are using antibiotics, are pregnant, have diabetes, or stay hot and sweaty for long periods. Some women get frequent yeast infections for no obvious reason.

## What is bacterial vaginosis?

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Bacterial vaginosis is usually caused by *Gardnerella vaginalis* bacteria. Why some women get this infection isn't clear. It's probably not caught from a sex partner.

## What is trichomoniasis?

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Trichomoniasis is caused by an organism called *Trichomonas vaginalis*. You can be infected but have no signs for a long time. Trichomoniasis is usually caught by having sex without a condom with someone who is infected.

## What about other infections?

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Two sexually transmitted infections, chlamydia and gonorrhea, can also cause vaginal discharge. These are infections of the cervix caused by bacteria. Sometimes the only symptom may be an increase of vaginal discharge. Both of these infections can be treated with antibiotic shots or pills.

# Can vaginal discharge be prevented or avoided?

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There is no need to prevent normal vaginal discharge. However, *abnormal* vaginal discharge may be prevented by following these tips.

- After using the toilet, always wipe from front to back. This may help prevent getting bacteria from your rectal area into your vagina.
- Wear cotton underpants during the day. Cotton allows your genital area to “breathe.” Don’t wear underpants at night.
- Avoid wearing tight pants, pantyhose, swimming suits, biking shorts, or leotards for long periods.
- Change your laundry detergent or fabric softener if you think it may be irritating your genital area.
- The latex in condoms and diaphragms and the sperm-killing gels that are used for birth control can be irritating for some women. If you think one of these things is a problem for you, talk to your doctor about other types of birth control.
- Avoid hot tubs.
- Bathe or shower daily and pat your genital area dry.
- Don’t douche.
- Avoid feminine hygiene sprays, colored or perfumed toilet paper, deodorant pads or tampons, and bubble bath.

# Vaginal discharge treatment

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There are different treatment methods, depending on what is causing the abnormal vaginal discharge.

## How are yeast infections treated?

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Yeast infections are usually treated with a medicine you put into your vagina. Yeast infections can also be treated with oral medicine.

If you have yeast infections often, your doctor may suggest you use a medicine you can buy without a prescription. But if you have any questions about what's causing your vaginitis, you should call your doctor. Many other things besides a yeast infection can cause vaginitis.

## How is bacterial vaginosis treated?

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Bacterial vaginosis is treated with antibiotic medicine, usually a pill.

## How is trichomoniasis treated?

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It's usually treated with oral antibiotics.

## Should my sex partner be treated?

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Sometimes. Talk to your doctor if you're sexually active. You may also need to avoid having sex or use condoms until you've been treated.

# Living with vaginal discharge

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Abnormal vaginal discharge is completely treatable. However, it may reoccur—sometimes with regularity. Some women suffer from frequent yeast infections. Vaginosis can also keep coming back. If so, talk to your doctor. It could mean you need a longer treatment period.

## Questions to ask your doctor

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- What is the likely cause of the changes in my vaginal discharge?
- Do I need any tests, such as tests for sexually transmitted infections?
- What do my test results mean?
- Based on the cause of my symptoms, what treatment do you recommend?
- Will I need medicine? How do I take it?
- When can I expect relief from my symptoms?
- Will my sexual partner need treatment?
- Is it safe for me to have sex?

## Resources

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[National Institutes of Health, MedlinePlus: Vaginal itching and discharge—adult and adolescent](#)