
GARDNERELLA VAGINITIS

Gardnerella vaginitis (also called hemophilus) is caused by a bacteria called gardnerella (or hemophilus) vaginalis. An infection can occur when there is an abundant growth of Gardnerella bacteria in the vagina. Gardnerella (hemophilus) was previously called non-specific vaginitis.

SYMPTOMS

The most common symptom of Gardnerella in a woman is a thick, white (like flour paste) discharge that may have a yellow or greenish-grey tinge. It is often foul smelling. There may be some inflammation or irritation of the vulva or vagina but this is usually not as severe as with yeast or trichomonas. Some women have burning with urination or pain with intercourse. However, up to 75% of women who have Gardnerella experience no symptoms. It is very common for men to have Gardnerella without having symptoms.

An important thing to note about Gardnerella vaginitis is that it often exists along side either yeast or trichomonas infections. In other words, a woman who has yeast or trich, will often have Gardnerella as well and it might be difficult to tell without having a vaginal culture done.

CAUSE

There is some controversy about the conditions that cause a Gardnerella infection to occur.

Some people believe that Gardnerella is one of the organisms normally present in the vagina that make up the normal vaginal "flora", and that factors such as stress, poor diet, lack of sleep, wearing tight pants or nylon underwear (anything that can alter the pH of the vagina) can upset the vaginal "ecosystem" and result in an overgrowth of Gardnerella.

Others believe that Gardnerella is almost always transmitted by sexual contact. Gardnerella can be passed during sexual intimacy between women if the infected vaginal secretions from a woman contact her partner's vulva. Gardnerella can infect the urinary tract in men (even though a man may have no visible symptoms) and be transferred to a woman during sexual intercourse.

According to some, it is possible to get Gardnerella from such things as douche nozzles, toilet seats, washcloths or bath water used by an infected person. The incubation period for Gardnerella is 5-10 days.

DIAGNOSIS

If a woman thinks she has an infection a gynecological exam should be done and a sample of her vaginal secretions taken. This sample should be sent to a lab to be cultured to check for the presence of Gardnerella.

COMPLICATIONS

Gardnerella bacteria can be passed from the vaginal opening to the urethra and result in a urinary tract infection. To avoid this possibility, always wipe the vulva from front to back.

There has been shown to be some connection between Gardnerella infections and abnormal Pap smears. If your Pap test shows abnormal cells, get a vaginal culture done to see if you have an infection. If you have Gardnerella, clearing up the infection will often help bring your Pap result back to normal.

TREATMENT

If a culture shows that another infection is present with the Gardnerella, try treating the other infection first and the Gardnerella may clear up at the same time.

CONVENTIONAL TREATMENT

The most common drug used to treat Gardnerella is the antibiotic metronidazole (Flagyl). Flagyl can be taken as a one day treatment in either a single dose of 2 grams or in divided doses of 1 gram each, taken twice the same day. Sometimes a dose of 1 gram each day for 3 days is prescribed. Alternatively it can be taken in smaller doses of 250 mg 3 times a day for 7 days. It can cause nausea and vomiting, particularly if alcohol is taken. Other possible side effects are diarrhea, constipation, cramps, dizziness, a metallic taste in your mouth, itching, and a dry mouth and vagina.

Flagyl should definitely not be taken under certain situations: if you have a history of blood disease, are undergoing anticoagulant therapy, have other infections in your body, have disease of the central nervous system, have peptic ulcers or if you are pregnant. Flagyl is a strong drug that can affect the whole body and there are numerous studies indicating its use is dangerous. Flagyl kills some white blood cells which help fight infections. Also in laboratory tests, Flagyl has caused gene mutations in bacteria, birth defects in animals, and cancer in rats and mice.

Flagyl should not be taken by women who are in the first trimester of pregnancy because its effect on the fetus is not known. It is known that it crosses the placental barrier and enters fetal circulation rapidly. Flagyl is also passed in breast milk and so should not be used during breastfeeding.

Because Flagyl kills some white blood cells, a person should wait about six weeks before taking it again so that the body has time to replace the white blood cells. A white blood cell count should be done before, during, and soon after taking

Flagyl the second time.

Ampicillin (500 mg, 4 times a day for 5-7 days) is another possible drug treatment for Gardnerella, although it apparently does not work as well as Flagyl. Do not take ampicillin if you are allergic to penicillin.

ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS

The following are alternative treatments that some women have found useful in treating trichomonas. They do not all work for every woman. You may have to experiment to find something that works for you. As well, it is important to remember that your general state of health influences your susceptibility to infection and your ability to recover from it. Changes in your diet may be necessary, such as decreasing the amount of refined carbohydrates and sugar that you eat, and eliminating coffee. It is also important to look at the stress and anxiety level in your life and how you can lower it. You may also want to consider giving your vagina a rest by avoiding vaginal sex during treatment. For further information on how these factors can contribute to vaginal infections, see the paper entitled "Understanding Vaginal Health".

Some medical practitioners think that Gardnerella is not a serious infection and that it does not require treatment (unless, of course, a woman has irritating symptoms or she has an abnormal Pap that they think might revert back to normal if the Gardnerella is treated). Many women have reported that Gardnerella infections have cleared up on their own, without treatment.

1. Douche: In 5 cups water put $1\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. comfrey root and $1\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. marshmallow root, simmer 20 minutes. Pour the whole mixture over 1 tsp. goldenseal and 1 tsp. myrrh, steep 10 minutes. Cool, strain and add 1 tbsp. white vinegar, 1 tsp. slippery elm powder. Insert a peeled clove of garlic in the vagina every morning (use a gauze-wrapped clove of garlic dipped in some vegetable oil to make it easier to insert), remove and do a retention douche with the above mixture every evening for 2 weeks.
2. Garlic suppositories and vinegar douches: Peel a clove of garlic carefully to avoid nicking the edge since the juice can cause a brief burning sensation. Place the clove of garlic in a piece of gauze about 1 ft. long and $\frac{3}{4}$ in. wide. Fold the gauze in half and twist it below the clove to make a tampon with a gauze tail. Then dip the garlic end in vegetable oil and insert it vaginally in the morning, discard it in the evening and insert a fresh clove for overnight. Next day, remove the garlic and douche with a solution of 2 tbsp. white vinegar in 1 quart of warm water. Repeat this, alternating with vinegar douche and garlic for 7-10 days. The garlic, which is a natural antibiotic, should be placed as close to the cervix as possible.
3. Douche: Place 1 tbsp. slippery elm bark in 1 cup of water. Simmer for 20 minutes. Remove from heat and add 2 tbsp. plantain leaves. Steep 10 minutes. Cool and strain before using. Douche twice a day for 2 weeks.
4. Douche: Mix equal parts of comfrey leaves, goldenseal powder, camomile and sage. Steep 1 level tsp. of the mixture in 1 quart boiling water for 20 minutes. Cool, strain and use. Douche once or twice a day for 3-5 days.

5. Betadine douche and Vagisec suppositories: Betadine is an antibacterial agent available at drugstores. Douche every morning with 1 tsp. betadine in a pint of warm water. Insert one Vagisec suppository each evening at bedtime. Use the douche throughout one entire menstrual cycle. Do not use this douche if you are allergic to iodine. Also, betadine stains a bright brown.

A technique to aid in the application of vaginal remedies has been named sucking air. This may be useful if regular douching is not effective for you. Lie on your back in the bath tub at a 45° angle, with your knees bent as close to your head as possible. This allows the vagina to balloon out so that there are no creases or crevices. Relax all of the muscles in your lower body, and then apply a douche that has been warmed to body temperature. The solution can remain in the vagina for several minutes, or until the position becomes too uncomfortable. This position allows the liquid to reach every nook and cranny of the vagina.

PREVENTION

Regular male sexual partners should be treated to avoid re-infecting a woman. Avoid vaginal penetration (unless the man is wearing a condom) or close contact of vaginal secretions until you are sure that the Gardnerella has gone away. (See section on Alternative Treatments.) Do not share towels, washcloths, douching equipment or bath water.

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