
YEAST INFECTIONS

Yeast is a normal inhabitant of the vagina and the digestive tract. A yeast infection usually happens when the conditions in the vagina change so that they become more favorable for the growth of yeast. The vagina is usually mildly acidic (ph 4-5) and this keeps the growth of yeast in check. If the vagina becomes less acid, and if the sugar content of vaginal secretions increases, the yeasts multiply quickly and a woman gets an infection.

Yeast can also be transmitted sexually, although this is not the most common way women get infections. Therefore, if you have a yeast infection, either avoid genital sexual contact or use a condom for intercourse. Oral-genital sex should be avoided during a yeast infection, because yeast can infect the mouth and throat, causing a painful condition called thrush.

SYMPTOMS OF A YEAST INFECTION

1. Burning, itching, vaginal soreness and pain.
2. A vaginal discharge with "cottage cheese" curds.
3. A characteristic odour suggestive of bread dough or the fermenting yeast smell of beer being brewed.
4. During self-exam with a speculum, white patches sticking on the vaginal wall. If a patch is removed, the area underneath it will look red.
5. Red, itchy, sore vulva.

CONDITIONS WHICH CAN CAUSE A WOMAN TO BE MORE LIKELY TO GET A YEAST INFECTION

1. Taking antibiotics. Usually the vagina has lactobacillus bacteria in it. These bacteria convert glucose in vaginal secretions into a mild acid lactic acid. When a woman takes antibiotics, these helpful bacteria are killed along with the harmful bacteria the antibiotics were intended for. If a woman is given Flagyl for a bacterial vaginal infection, she can end up with a yeast infection after the treatment because the lactobacillus bacteria are killed by Flagyl along with trichomonas and hemophilus. If you must take antibiotics, use acidophilus (yogurt culture) tablets as vaginal suppositories during and right after treatment, and eat plenty of yogurt.
2. The Pill. Women using birth control pills find that they are more prone to yeast infections because the hormonal changes caused by the Pill cause their

vagina to become less acid. Use another method of birth control to avoid infection.

3. Pregnancy. During pregnancy many women find that they are more prone to yeast infections. Eat lots of yogurt, and treat any symptoms of infection as soon as you start to feel them. Don't douche when pregnant, as there is a danger of forcing some of the douche into the cervix and uterus.
4. Diabetes. Women who are diabetic have sugar in their urine, and more sugar in vaginal secretions, causing them to be prone to yeast infections.
5. Too much sugar in the diet. A high sugar and refined carbohydrate diet can cause conditions in the vagina to be more favorable to yeast. Alcohol is converted into sugar, so drinking a lot of alcohol can have the same effect.
6. Being generally run down, not getting enough sleep, and stress. When your body is run down, you are more prone to infection, including yeast infections.
7. Using bubble bath, soap on the vagina, perfumed soap and other irritants. Soaps and bubble baths are alkaline, causing the vagina to become less acid and helping yeast to grow. They also dry the vulva, causing irritation and inflammation.
9. Use of drugs which suppress the immune system. Cortisone and other corticosteroids interfere with the body's immune system and can make a woman more prone to a yeast infection. Cancer chemotherapy also suppresses the immune system.
10. The Menstrual Cycle. Some women get yeast infections at certain times during the menstrual cycle. This can be in the week before menstruation, during menstruation, or just after. During menstruation, the vagina is less acid because menstrual blood is slightly alkaline. Either right before or right after menstruation, the vagina may be drier than at other times because the cervical mucus has formed a thick plug at the opening of the cervix. At this time in a woman's cycle, the mucus is not bathing and lubricating the vaginal walls. Dead cells from the vaginal walls will not be washed out by the mucus, but will stay and provide sugars to feed the yeast. Because her vagina is drier than usual, a woman may be more prone to vaginal irritation and, as a result, infection. It can be helpful to put vinegar in your bath water during the time in your cycle in which you are prone to yeast infections. You can also try cutting out or cutting down on sugar, alcohol, and coffee during this time, and being attentive to getting plenty of rest and exercise.

TREATMENT OF A YEAST INFECTION

Many women find that yeast infections can be successfully treated without going to a doctor and getting prescription drugs, particularly if the treatment is started early, when the symptoms are first felt. The treatment may not work or the infection may recur if a condition such as a big sugar diet or being under a lot of stress is contributing to the infection but is not being changed. Avoid using apple cider vinegar or wine vinegar; they both contain sugar, and are produced by a fermentation process involving yeast.

1. Vinegar Douche. Prepare douche with 2 tbsp. white vinegar to 1 quart water. You may also soak a menstrual sponge in the same strength solution, and insert it into the vagina, or you may prefer to use a sitz bath (a shallow, hot bath in a small tub--a baby bathtub works very well) of the same vinegar solution. You can use your fingers to pull open the vagina while in the sitz bath so the solution gets into the vagina. Pregnant women should not douche, so this is a better method to use while pregnant.

Women have used the juice of one half lemon to 1 quart of water or 1 tbsp. vitamin C powder to 1 quart of water for the same acidifying effect as vinegar.

2. Yogurt or acidophilus tablets. These provide lactobacillus bacteria to the yeast, and will create an acid environment because the bacteria convert sugars into lactic acid. Be sure to get the type of tablets which do not contain sugar (Swiss Herbal brand is one OK brand). At bedtime, put one tablet high in the vagina, one near the vaginal entrance.

If you have a mild yeast infection, don't use a lot of lactobacillus. Try using vinegar douches first, or alternating lactobacillus tablets with a vinegar douche the next day. Women can get a lactobacillus overgrowth, causing an itchy discharge.

3. Plain yogurt. It has the same effect as the tablets, but can feel more soothing. Use it in a douche, or open the vagina with a speculum and spoon yogurt in.
4. Garlic suppositories. The best way to use these is to alternate garlic suppositories one day with yogurt or dilute vinegar the next. Carefully peel a small clove of garlic. Try not to nick it as it may burn if nicked. Wrap the garlic in a piece of gauze 12" x 3" or 4", making a kind of tampon with a gauze tail. Now dip the garlic end in vegetable oil to make insertion easier. Leave it in for 12 hours. You will probably notice a garlic taste in your mouth a little while after placing the garlic in your vagina.
5. White oak or bayberry tea. Use 1 tsp. bayberry bark and 1 tsp. white oak bark per pint of water. Steep in boiling water in a covered container until lukewarm, strain and douche. You may douche with this once or twice daily (or take a sitz bath of this tea).
6. Juniper. A juniper douche may be made by soaking a handful of juniper berries in water overnight, then add to 1 quart boiling water and boil for $\frac{1}{2}$ hour. Let cool to body temperature and douche with the strained liquid. This seems to be particularly helpful for diabetic women, who have a hard time getting rid of yeast infections, as the yeast thrives on the excess sugar in their system.
7. A poultice of natural cottage cheese on a menstrual pad can relieve itching. Natural (not supermarket) cottage cheese contains lactobacillus bacteria like yogurt.

MEDICAL REMEDIES

Nystatin cream is most often prescribed by doctors to treat yeast infections. It is an anti-fungal cream which works by killing the yeast. It is messier and more expensive than most home remedies. Some women will try using measures to acidify the vagina first, and if they see no improvement within a few days to a week, try Nystatin.

RECURRENT AND CHRONIC YEAST INFECTIONS

Some women are plagued by recurrent yeast infections which do not respond well to measures used to acidify the vagina, or to Nystatin and other anti-fungal drugs. Some women with recurrent yeast have linked the problem to food allergies, and often to an allergic reaction to yeast itself. If you have recurrent yeast, try being tested for allergies and changing your diet to avoid foods to which you're allergic. A clinical ecologist or a naturopath will be able to help you make the changes in your diet needed to get rid of your yeast infection. This can be a slow process, and it can involve paying a lot more attention to maintaining a healthy lifestyle than most people are used to. Clinical ecologists sometimes prescribe heavy doses of oral anti-fungal drugs along with dietary changes. Taking anti-fungals orally for a long period of time can interfere with your digestion. It would be worth trying the dietary changes alone first for a period of time (1-2 months).

Nystatin is not well absorbed by the body when taken orally. Therefore, it is only helpful if you have an intestinal yeast infection as well as a vaginal infection.

An anti-fungal like Nystatin works by directly killing the yeast in a woman's vagina. This can be effective in ending a yeast infection. However, because yeast is commonly present on a woman's skin, in her intestine, and in her vagina, she will soon have yeast available again to re-infect her. If the basic conditions which caused the yeast to take over and cause an infection haven't changed, she will get a recurrence. A more effective long-term means of avoiding yeast infections is to change the conditions in the vagina so that they are not conducive to infections. This includes measures like changing your diet to avoid excesses of refined sugars and starches, limiting alcohol consumption, and paying attention to maintaining overall good health.

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