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Vaginitis

What is vaginitis?

Vaginitis is swelling, burning, itching, or an infection of the vagina. When the vulva are also affected, it is called vulvovaginitis. The vulva is the outer part of your genitals. It includes the skin around the opening of the vagina (birth canal) and urethra (where urine leaves your body). Vaginitis is a very common problem that females of any age can have.

What is the cause?

Vaginitis can be caused by infection with bacteria, viruses, or yeast. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs or STDs) are a common cause of infection. An overgrowth of bacteria normally found in the vagina can also cause vaginitis (a condition called bacterial vaginosis or nonspecific vaginitis).

Vaginitis can also be caused by irritants, such as:

- Birth control products, such as condoms, diaphragms, and spermicides
- Feminine hygiene products, such as perfumed sprays, powders, or douches
- Perfumed soaps, detergents, or fabric softeners
- Nonabsorbent, heat-retaining clothing, such as nylon pantyhose and tights
- Antibiotics
- Tampons
- Sexual devices
- Injury
- Objects in the vagina, such as a lost tampon

Stress, poor hygiene, or a decrease in the female hormone estrogen (atrophic vaginitis) are other possible causes.

Sometimes the cause of vaginitis is not known.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom of vaginitis is a lot of whitish, gray, or yellowish discharge from the vagina. Some milky vaginal discharge is normal for females of all ages, but infections usually cause an abnormal amount of discharge.

You may also have:

- A bad odor from the vagina
- Itching or burning
- Swollen, red vulva that may be painful or itchy
- Bleeding in the vaginal area
- Symptoms of a urinary tract infection, such as pain when you urinate

If you have pain in your lower belly or irregular bleeding with these symptoms, see your healthcare provider right away. If you are at risk for a sexually transmitted disease and have the above symptoms, you should also see your provider right away.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. Tests may include tests of vaginal discharge, urine, and blood.

How is it treated?

Infections are treated with antibiotic pills or shots, antifungal or antibacterial creams or gels, vaginal tablets, or vaginal inserts. Your healthcare provider may ask you to stop sexual activity for a time. Your provider may also ask that your partner be treated to prevent reinfection or spread of the infection.

Vaginitis caused by irritants can usually be treated by avoiding the irritants. Sometimes it may also be treated with steroid or hormone creams.

For women in menopause, atrophic vaginitis can be treated with hormone pills or cream.

Don't treat vaginitis with nonprescription medicine without the approval of your healthcare provider. It could be the wrong treatment.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow your healthcare provider's instructions and take all of your medicine as prescribed. If you stop taking your medicine too soon, the infection or irritation may come back.

To help relieve the symptoms you can:

- Bathe with nonirritating, unscented soap. Use water that is warm but not hot. Rinse the genital area thoroughly but gently. Pat dry without rubbing.
- Wear loose-fitting, all-cotton underwear or cotton-crotch underwear. Change your underwear every day. Don't wear underwear when you sleep at night.
- Keep your genital area dry.
- Use a vaginal lubricant if you have mild pain during sex.

Follow your healthcare provider's instructions. Ask your provider:

- How and when you will hear your test results
- How long it will take to recover
- If there are activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup. Keep all appointments for provider visits or tests.

How can I help prevent vaginitis?

Practice good personal hygiene:

- Avoid wearing pantyhose or tights for too many hours, especially in hot, humid weather.
- Wipe from front to back after using the restroom.
- Use deodorant-free white toilet paper to avoid perfume and dye that might irritate.
- Avoid using feminine hygiene products, such as sprays and powders, and bath additives, such as bubble baths and oils.
- Avoid douching. Your body makes a milky discharge that naturally cleanses the vagina. If you douche, you will remove this natural protection against infections and odor.
- Use deodorant-free sanitary pads or tampons.

If you tend to get a yeast infection when you are taking antibiotics, tell your healthcare provider if an antibiotic is prescribed for you.

Take these precautions when you have sex:

- Avoid spermicidal foams, gels, and creams.
- Use latex or polyurethane condoms during foreplay and every time you have vaginal, oral, or anal sex.
- Have just 1 sexual partner who is not having sex with anyone else.
- If you have had sex and are worried that you may have been infected, see your healthcare provider even if you don't have any symptoms.