

Your guide to sexual health and wellbeing

What do you know about...

Chlamydia

Vaginal health

Genital herpes

Gonorrhoea

Genital warts



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**Remember, you can also
get an infection without
having sex.**

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Vaginal health: your questions answered

What is vaginal health?

Normal vaginal secretions keep the vagina moist and help to protect against damage or infection. It is usual for women to have a variable amount of vaginal discharge that is white or clear. This can increase or decrease at certain times depending on your monthly cycle, whether you are pregnant, or if you are sexually aroused or 'turned on'.

Some things, however, can disrupt this normal, healthy balance. Common causes of irritation include antibiotics, clothing, over-washing, or the use of strong soaps, fabric softeners, shower gels or vaginal deodorants.

Irritation and any change in vaginal discharge could mean that something is not right. These changes may be:

- more discharge than usual
- an unpleasant smell, often worse after sex
- a change in the colour of discharge
- sore, itchy skin around the genital area
- discomfort when passing urine
- a rash or tiny cuts in the genital area.

What infections can affect the vagina?

Women can get a number of different vaginal infections. Two of the most common are called **thrush** (candidiasis), and **bacterial vaginosis** (BV) - these infections are not sexually transmitted. If you notice any of the symptoms mentioned in this leaflet, visit your local GP surgery or pharmacy for help and advice.

Sexually transmitted infections, such as **chlamydia** and **trichomonas vaginalis** (TV or 'trichs'), can also cause a heavier discharge than usual so it is important to get any change in discharge checked out if you think you might have a sexually transmitted infection (STI). Information on these, and other infections, are available in the other leaflets in this series.

Thrush (candidiasis)

Q. What is thrush?

A. Thrush is a very common infection. It is caused by yeast, known as candida, which usually lives harmlessly on the skin and in the mouth, gut and vagina. It doesn't usually cause any problems but, under certain conditions, the yeast multiplies in the vagina and causes a number of uncomfortable symptoms.

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Thrush is not usually transmitted sexually but having sex can irritate the vagina and make the symptoms more obvious. Most women will have an episode of thrush at least once in their lifetime. For a small group of women, troublesome, recurrent thrush can occur for no apparent reason.

Other factors that can encourage candida to multiply and result in thrush include:

- taking antibiotics (some women develop thrush after taking antibiotics and other medication for another illness)
- using a vaginal deodorant or perfumed bubble bath
- using perfumed fabric softener
- using baby/alcohol wipes on the genital skin
- broken skin which is inflamed and irritated
- wearing nylon underwear or tight-fitting trousers (a moist, warm environment helps the yeast to flourish)
- pregnancy
- diabetes.

Thrush can also affect men, particularly those who are not circumcised.

Q. What are the symptoms of thrush?

A. Usually the candida yeast is prevented from multiplying and causing discomfort by other harmless bacteria living in and on the body. However, when these conditions change, symptoms of thrush can occur. You may notice:

- itching, soreness and swelling around the genital area
- a thick, white discharge
- burning discomfort during sex
- pain when peeing.

If you think that you may have thrush, speak to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist who can offer treatment on the basis of your symptoms. Testing is not always necessary.

Q. How is thrush diagnosed?

A. If your symptoms don't improve after using a treatment purchased from your pharmacy, it may be necessary to get checked at your local GP surgery, or sexual health service (for example, GUM or family planning).

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Getting tested is simple and straightforward. The nurse or doctor will usually use a swab to take a sample of cells from the vagina. A swab looks a bit like a cotton bud, and collecting a sample only takes a few minutes and is not painful, although it may be a little uncomfortable for a moment. The sample may be examined under a microscope while you are at the GUM service. This means that, if you do have thrush, treatment can be started without delay.

Q. If I have thrush, what happens next?

A. Treatment for thrush is usually simple. A cream can be applied to the affected area to relieve the itching and soreness, and women may be given special tablets (known as 'pessaries') to insert directly into the vagina. You might also be given a tablet to take by mouth.

Some creams that are used for the treatment of thrush can weaken latex condoms, contraceptive diaphragms and caps. Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist for advice.

Always tell the doctor or nurse if you are pregnant or think you might be, or if you are breastfeeding. This may affect the type of treatment you are given.

You will not pass thrush onto a partner if you have sex when you have an episode, but it may be uncomfortable if you do, so sex is best avoided for this reason.

Q. How can I help treat myself?

A. Some women find it helps alleviate symptoms to dip a tampon into natural yoghurt and insert it into the vagina. The bacteria in the yoghurt can help to soothe and treat the infection. If you want to try this self-help method, make sure you use live, plain yoghurt, which is sometimes labelled 'bio' yoghurt. It can also help if you limit, or stop using, soap for a few days, and wear loose cotton clothing without any underwear.

Q. Can I prevent thrush?

A. Some women experience repeat infections of thrush and it is not clear what causes this. If this becomes a problem, discuss your options with a doctor, nurse or health adviser. There are a number of things you can do to help reduce the likelihood of thrush:

- Avoid wearing tights, nylon underwear or tight trousers or jeans.
- Avoid using perfumed soaps or bubble bath, vaginal deodorants and disinfectants.
- Stop using a perfumed fabric softener when washing towels and underwear.
- Consider washing with a soap substitute – your pharmacist can advise what is best for you.
- Avoid using alcohol/baby wipes on your genital skin.

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- After going to the toilet, always wipe from the front to the back to avoid transferring germs to the vagina.
- If you develop thrush when you use antibiotics, it may be worth asking your doctor to prescribe treatment for thrush at the same time.

Q. Should my partner be treated for thrush?

A. Thrush is not usually passed on to someone else, for example, by having sex, so your partner probably won't need treatment for thrush. Men are less likely to get thrush, although some men can develop an irritation as a result of a reaction to the yeast. If it is necessary to treat your partner, a cream can help. Talk with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist for advice.

Bacterial vaginosis (BV)

Q. What is bacterial vaginosis?

A. Bacterial vaginosis occurs when bacteria that normally live in the vagina multiply and cause symptoms. This may be triggered by using perfumed bubble bath or soap, vaginal deodorants, a strong detergent or fabric softener for washing clothes, underwear or towels, or smoking. The exact cause is, however, unknown.

Having sex can cause BV to develop because the semen in the vagina may alter the acid level which helps the bacteria to multiply and cause symptoms. Men can't catch BV.

Q. What are the symptoms of BV?

A. Often there aren't any symptoms, but some women may notice a change in the normal discharge from the vagina. This discharge could be grey and have a fishy smell which can be more noticeable during and after sex, and during periods.

Q. How is BV diagnosed?

A. If you are worried that you may have BV, visit your local GP surgery, pharmacy, or sexual health service (for example, GUM or family planning). These are specialist services that are completely confidential, and you can go to without having to see your GP first.

You don't always need to have a test before getting treated as you can get this from your pharmacist. If you do go to your GP or sexual health service, the nurse or doctor may use a swab to collect a sample of the discharge from your vagina. A swab looks a bit like a cotton bud, and collecting a sample only takes a few minutes and is not painful, although it may be a little uncomfortable for a moment.

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Usually a diagnosis can be made straight-away because of the distinctive appearance of the discharge, and treatment can be started immediately.

Q. If I have BV, what happens next?

A. Treatment for BV is usually simple. There are a number of different types of antibiotics available – a cream to use in the vagina may also be given.

However, some creams can weaken latex condoms, diaphragms and other forms of contraception. Tell your doctor or nurse what contraception you are using, and ask for advice about other forms of contraception that may be available and suitable for you to use when you are being treated.

Always tell the doctor or nurse if you are pregnant or think you might be, or if you are breastfeeding. This may also affect the type of treatment you are given.

Female partners do not usually need treatment unless they also have symptoms.

Safer sex

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) can pass from one person to another through unprotected sex and sharing sex toys. You don't need to have lots of sexual partners to get an STI. However, you are more likely to have an STI if you have had a recent change in sexual partner or if you have had more than two sexual partners in the last 12 months.

Safer sex involves using condoms and dental dams for oral sex, and condoms with water-based lube for anal and vaginal sex. This helps prevent infections being passed on to your partner.

Condoms are available free from sexual health services, including GUM and family planning, and young people's drop-in services. They are also for sale at most pharmacies and supermarkets. Always use a quality condom that displays the European CE Kitemark.

For more information, visit www.sexualhealthscotland.co.uk or call the Information Line on 0800 121 4590.