

# Vaginal Thrush

Vaginal thrush is common. Treatment is usually quick, easy, and effective. Some women get recurring thrush. A longer course of treatment may then be needed.

## What is thrush?

A yeast called *Candida* causes thrush. Small numbers of *Candida* commonly live on the skin and around the vaginal area. These are usually harmless. The immune system and the normal 'defense' bacteria of the skin and vagina usually stop *Candida* from thriving. However, when conditions are good for *Candida*, it multiplies and may invade the vagina and cause symptoms.

The conditions *Candida* like best are warm, moist, airless parts of the body. This is why the vagina is the most common site for thrush. However, other areas sometimes develop thrush. For example, the groin, the mouth, and the nappy area in babies.

## What are the symptoms of vaginal thrush?

Thrush is the most common cause of a vaginal discharge. The discharge is usually creamy white, but is sometimes watery. It can cause itch, redness, discomfort, or pain around the outside of the vagina. Sometimes symptoms are minor and clear up on their own. Often symptoms can be quite irritating and will not go without treatment. Thrush does not damage the vagina, and it does not spread to damage the uterus (womb). If you are pregnant it will not harm your baby.

## Who gets vaginal thrush?

Any female can develop thrush. However, certain situations make thrush more likely. The vagina has a certain amount of mucus and also contains many harmless 'defense' bacteria. The mucus and defense bacteria help to protect the vagina from *Candida* (and other bugs). Situations that may alter these natural defenses and make thrush more likely include: pregnancy, having diabetes, and taking antibiotics.

In some women 'douching' (cleaning) the vagina, using spermicides, or using tampons when a period is light may also unsettle the normal condition of the vagina and allow thrush to develop.

more easily.

## **Traditional remedies**

The following remedies may help in mild cases for some, but not all, women. Natural 'live' yogurt (not non-live or fruit yogurt) inserted into the vagina is soothing, and in some women may help fight off Candida. Vinegar or bicarbonate of soda put in warm baths alters the acidity of the vagina. It is soothing and may sometimes kill Candida.

## **What are the usual treatments for thrush?**

Modern treatments with pessaries, creams, or tablets, which contain anti-yeast medicines, are usually very effective. You can get them on prescription, but you can also buy some at pharmacies without a prescription. If you have a one-off thrush infection, a single dose tablet, or a short course of cream or pessaries put in the vagina, should work.

If you have had thrush four or more times in one year, then the treatment will usually need to last longer and should be monitored by your doctor. You may need to take a tablet, or use a cream or pessary, every few weeks over about six months to prevent thrush from returning.

## **What can I do to prevent thrush recurring?**

It is common to have several thrush infections in a lifetime. Some women have frequent episodes. The following suggestions may help some women to prevent recurring episodes of thrush.

- **Hygiene.** Thrush is not due to poor hygiene. However, excess washing and douching of the vagina, bubble baths, scented soaps, spermicides, etc, may alter the normal conditions of the vagina. The normal mucus and defense bacteria may be upset by these things and allow Candida to infect. It is best to wash just with water and unscented soap, and do not douche the vagina.
- **Toileting.** When you use toilet paper, wipe from the front to the back. This avoids pushing Candida forward from the anus (back passage), which may sometimes cause thrush to develop.
- **Clothes.** Don't wear nylon underwear or tight fitting jeans too often. Loose cotton pants are best. Stockings rather than tights are preferable. The aim is to prevent the vaginal area from being constantly warm, moist, and airless.
- **Periods.** Use towels rather than tampons when bleeding during your period is light as tampons absorb the protecting mucus of the vagina.
- **Antibiotics.** Be aware that thrush is more likely if you take antibiotics for another condition. Antibiotics may kill the defense bacteria in the vagina, but as Candida is a yeast and not a bacterium, this will not be killed by antibiotics. This is not to say that

every course of antibiotics will lead to thrush. But, some women are particularly prone to this problem. If you are prescribed antibiotics then have some anti-thrush cream ready to 'nip it in the bud' at the first sign of thrush. Adding a couple of tablespoons of vinegar, or bicarbonate of soda, to the bath while taking antibiotics might also help to prevent an episode of thrush.

- **Contraception.** It is controversial whether taking the contraceptive pill increases your chance of having thrush. It is generally agreed that you should not stop the contraceptive pill if you get thrush. Despite this, if you have found that thrush has become more of a problem since starting the pill, then it may be worth considering changing to another form of contraception. However, it is possible that if you have sex more often, it may be the reason why you have thrush more often.
- **Sex.** Make sure the vagina is well lubricated before having sex as friction may cause minor damage to the vagina, which may make thrush more likely. A lubricant during sex might help (such as KY jelly) if natural secretions do not seem sufficient. Some women find that having sex seems to be the reason for recurring thrush. In difficult cases, some women resort to either placing some anti-thrush cream in the vagina before sex, or using a small anti-thrush pessary after sex.

### **Does my sexual partner need treatment too?**

Male sexual partners should be treated if they have symptoms of thrush on their penis. (Symptoms in men include redness, itch, and soreness of the foreskin and the head (glans) of the penis.) Otherwise they do not usually need to be treated. It is unlikely that women 'catch' thrush from men who have no symptoms.