



## Vaginal Yeast Infections

### What are the symptoms of vaginal yeast infection?

Seventy-five percent of all women will experience at least one vaginal yeast infection during her life and many are plagued by recurrent yeast infections. Learning to recognize the symptoms of vaginal yeast infection is vital before women attempt self-treatment.

Symptoms of yeast infection include itching, burning, redness, and irritation of the vaginal area. Severe yeast infections may cause swelling of the vulva and in some cases women experience painful and/or frequent urination, which is caused by inflammation of the urinary opening.

Excessive vaginal discharge which is thicker than normal, appears whiter and curd-like (almost like cottage cheese) will be apparent in women experiencing vaginal yeast infections. Sexual intercourse may be painful due to the inflammation and dryness of the vaginal discharge.

### What causes yeast infections?

*Candida albicans* is a yeast like fungus which is often found in the mouth, vagina, and intestinal tract; it is a normal inhabitant of humans that usually does not cause any adverse effects. *Candida* of the mouth is known as thrush and is often found in infants and people with a variety of health conditions. When *Candida* is found in the vagina it is known as a yeast infection or monilial vaginitis.

Yeast infections are caused by an overgrowth of the normal fungi that live in the vaginal area. The most common fungi is *Candida albicans*. Overgrowth of *Candida* is often precluded by recent use of antibiotics, or by wearing clothing such as nylon, lycra, or spandex that traps moisture and heat. Other factors that often contribute to yeast infections include pregnancy, obesity, PMS, multiple sclerosis, and diabetes.

Yeast infections are common among women infected by HIV and women who suffer from recurrent episodes of yeast infection should be tested for HIV infection. Other possible causes include the use of oral contraceptives, and consuming large amounts of sugars, starch, and yeasts.

### If it's not a yeast infection, what could it be?

Bacterial vaginitis/vaginosis is a far more prevalent vaginal infection than yeast infection and is characterized by a foul odor which is not present in a yeast infection. Untreated bacterial vaginitis can result in pelvic inflammatory disease and lead to future infertility. It is imperative that a woman who is self-treating what she thinks is a yeast infection be positive that her vaginal infection is actually caused by yeast and not some other infection or STD.

Sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhea and herpes can be mistaken for yeast infections because some of the symptoms are similar — there is discharge associated with gonorrhea and herpes may often cause itching. Unless a woman is absolutely positive that her vaginal infection is yeast, she should seek the advice of her practitioner before self-treatment begins.





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### **Treating vaginal yeast infections**

Women spend \$60 million annually on OTC products and many times candida albicans is not the true culprit. Vaginal yeast infections commonly are misdiagnosed by women who buy one of the over-the-counter remedies which are available in the U.S. Self-treatment of vaginal yeast infections should never be attempted by any woman who has never been first diagnosed for at least one yeast infection by her practitioner.

If a woman is able to determine that her symptoms are truly caused by yeast, she has several treatment options she may choose from including a variety of creams which are available at pharmacies throughout the U.S. Treatments with OTC products range from one to seven days. Creams available include brand names such as Monistat, Femstat, Gyne-Lotrimin, and Mycostatin. Homeopathic creams such as Vagisil are available as well which is at least helpful in reducing the incessant itching that is present in most yeast infections.

Women who prefer a less messy alternative to the creams that are sold OTC may ask her practitioner for a prescription medication such as Diflucan which is a one dose oral medication for the treatment of yeast infections.

### **Tips to Prevent Yeast Infections**

Always wear white cotton panties; avoid nylon and lycra as much as possible; never wear panty hose without wearing cotton panties underneath. Postmenopausal women and women who use oral contraceptives may find using a vaginal lubricant during sexual intercourse helpful in preventing vaginal discomfort and irritation. Yeast is a normal inhabitant of the intestinal tract; always wipe from front to back after a bowel movement to prevent transferring yeast to the vaginal area; care must be taken during sexual intercourse to prevent vaginal infections from occurring due to contamination with organisms from the bowel or rectum. Some women find eating one cup of yogurt a day when taking antibiotics is helpful to prevent the yeast infections that often follow antibiotic treatment; however yogurt alone will not cure vaginal yeast infections. Avoid perfumed bath additives, as well as powders in the vaginal area. Douching is never a good idea and can, in fact, be harmful since it washes away the natural protective mucous of the vagina and leaves women susceptible to vaginal infections.

