

Vaginal thrush

Vaginal thrush is a common infection caused by an overgrowth of *Candida albicans* yeast. This yeast lives naturally in the bowel and in small numbers in the vagina. It is mostly harmless, but symptoms can develop if yeast numbers increase. About 75 per cent of women will have vaginal thrush in their lifetime. Other names for this infection are candidiasis or monilia.

Symptoms can include vaginal itching or burning, a white discharge and stinging or burning while urinating. Vaginal creams or vaginal tablets (pessaries) can help reduce the symptoms of thrush. Thrush can also occur in other parts of the body, such as the mouth.

Symptoms

Symptoms you may experience if you develop vaginal thrush include:

- Vaginal discomfort – itching or burning
- A thick, white discharge with a ‘cottage cheese’ appearance and yeasty smell
- Redness or swelling of the vagina or vulva
- Stinging or burning while urinating or during sex
- Splits in the genital skin.

Diagnosis

To make a diagnosis of vaginal thrush, your doctor will need to:

- Examine your genitals
- Take a swab from the affected area.

Thrush is not sexually transmitted

Vaginal thrush is not a sexually transmissible infection (STI). It is caused by an overgrowth of the yeast *Candida albicans*. This overgrowth may be due to:

- Antibiotic use
- Oral contraceptive use
- Diabetes
- Pregnancy
- Menstrual cycle changes
- General illnesses like diabetes, iron deficiency and immune system disorders
- Associated vulval skin conditions.

Sometimes, the reason for candida overgrowth cannot be identified.

Treatment

Treatment aims to reduce the number of yeasts so they no longer cause symptoms. Options that are available from your local pharmacist without a script include:

- **Antifungal creams or vaginal pessaries (tablets)** – these are put inside the vagina with a special applicator and are used from one to six days, depending on the instructions. Occasionally a second course of treatment is required. Repeated topical treatments (applied to the skin) may occasionally cause skin irritation.

- **Oral tablets** – these are called fluconazole and are designed to be swallowed. This treatment is more expensive than other options and is not recommended for pregnant women or as a 'first line' treatment. If you are on other medications or are pregnant, consult with your doctor or pharmacist before taking fluconazole.

Treatment is not always necessary

Sometimes symptoms only last for a short time (for example, the week before your period) and treatment is not necessary.

Preventing thrush

To help prevent vaginal thrush:

- Wipe your bottom from front to back after going to the toilet. This will prevent the spread of *Candida albicans* from the anus to the vagina.
- Avoid using soap to wash the genital area. Soap substitutes can be used. Sorbolene (with or without glycerine) is probably the cheapest and is very effective. When using sorbolene:
 - Avoid perfumed products.
 - Be aware that products containing 10 per cent glycerine can occasionally cause stinging.
 - Apply before the area is wetted and rinse off lightly. A slight greasy film should remain.
- Avoid using antiseptics, douches or perfumed sprays in the genital area.
- Avoid using perfumed toilet papers and menstrual products.
- Avoid wearing tight-fitting pants and synthetic underwear.
- Consider changing your clothes-washing detergent and don't use fabric softeners.

Thrush and sex

You can still have sex when you have vaginal thrush. However, it can be uncomfortable and you may experience a burning sensation during or after sex. Use plenty of lubricant to protect your skin.

Thrush is not a sexually transmissible infection (STI), but male partners can sometimes get redness and irritation after sex.

The treatment for thrush can weaken condoms so apply the treatments after you have had sex if you are using condoms.

Ruling out other conditions

A number of other vaginal conditions result in symptoms that are similar to those of thrush. You should see your doctor if you:

- Are not sure you have thrush
- Have had several episodes of thrush
- Have had recent unprotected sex with a new partner
- Have pain in your pelvic area or abnormal bleeding
- Have treated yourself with a thrush treatment and your symptoms haven't gone away.

Management of recurrent thrush

If you experience repeated episodes of thrush, it is recommended that you see a doctor to confirm that it is thrush and that you don't have a sexually transmissible infection (STI). Your doctor can check for the presence of other skin conditions that may have similar symptoms and exclude other conditions that can cause thrush (such as diabetes).

Any factor contributing to the overgrowth of *Candida albicans* should be identified and managed. If no contributing factors are found, a course of preventative treatment may be recommended.

There is no evidence to support the treatment of male partners of women who experience thrush. Thrush outbreaks, while uncomfortable, do not cause any long-term health issues. There is also no clear evidence that dietary changes prevent thrush, but the research is limited.

Where to get help

- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre Tel. (03) 9341 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY (for the hearing impaired) (03) 9347 8619
- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre

Things to remember

- Thrush is caused by an overgrowth of yeast known as *Candida albicans*.
- Vaginal creams and pessaries help reduce candida overgrowth and ease thrush symptoms.
- Thrush outbreaks, while uncomfortable, do not cause any long-term health issues.
- Consult your doctor if you have recurrent attacks of thrush.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Melbourne Sexual Health Centre

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