Guide to Vaginal Infections

This handout is to help you learn about the different types of vaginal infections, including the signs of vaginal infections and ways to prevent infection. Vaginal infections may or may not be sexually transmitted. Please ask your nurse if you would like to have a handout on sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Basic Facts about Vaginal Infections

Most women have some vaginal discharge. This discharge keeps your vagina clean and moist. Normal discharge has a mild odor and should be clear, white or yellow. When it dries, it may leave a yellowish color on your underpants. You may have a few days of heavy, clear, slippery discharge about halfway between your periods. This occurs when your ovary releases an egg.

General signs of vaginal infection are:

- Change in vaginal discharge
- Itching or burning around the vagina
- Painful sexual intercourse
- Chills or fever
- Stomach or pelvic pain or cramping
- Sores or warts near the vaginal opening
- Burning when you urinate
If you develop any of these signs, call your doctor right away to make an appointment. Your doctor will do an exam to find out the type of infection you have.

**Types of Vaginal Infections**

- **Candidiasis (Yeast)**
  Candidiasis is caused by a fungus. It also is known as a “yeast” infection. The discharge is thick and white and looks like cottage cheese. The odor is strong, but not unpleasant. The most common sign is a lot of vaginal itching.

- **Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)**
  Bacterial vaginosis is an infection caused by bacteria that normally live in the stool. It is not sexually transmitted, but is more common in women who are sexually active. The discharge is watery, gray or yellow, and has a bad smell.

- **Atrophic Vaginitis**
  Atrophic Vaginitis is due to the thinning and shrinking of the vagina after menopause. You may have discharge, itching and burning. Urination and sexual intercourse may become difficult and painful.

It is very important to see your health care provider if you develop any signs of infection. Only your doctor can find the type of infection and the best treatment for you.

**Treatments for Vaginal Infections**

- **Medicines**
  The medicine used to treat vaginal infections depends on the type of infection. Sometimes more than one type of infection is present and more than one treatment method may be needed. Follow your doctor’s instructions exactly and use your medicine as directed. Even if the discharge goes away before the medicine is finished, the infection may still be present. Be sure to finish taking all your medicine.
- **Bathing**
  Bathe or shower every day and clean the area around your vagina thoroughly. Keep the area as dry as possible.

- **Sanitary Pads**
  Use sanitary pads if there is a lot of drainage. **Do not** use tampons to absorb drainage.

Both you and your partner may need treatment. **Some types of vaginal infections can be spread by sexual contact.** Ask your doctor if your partner needs treatment as well.

**How to Prevent of Vaginal Infections**

If you have vaginal infections that keep coming back, try these tips to help prevent it:

- Avoid spreading germs from the rectum to the vagina. After a bowel movement, wipe from front to back, away from the vagina and towards the anus.

- Clean the labia (the lips of the vagina) thoroughly and keep this area as dry as possible.

- Avoid irritating soaps or detergents, feminine hygiene sprays, perfumed toilet paper or perfumed tampons.

- Thoroughly clean diaphragms and spermicide applicators with hot soapy water.

- **Do not** douche.
  - Douching can wash away your vagina's "good" bacteria to cause you to have more vaginal infections.
  - The vagina cleans itself so a douche upsets the normal balance to make it more likely that you could have growth of odor causing bacteria. Your vaginal discharge will smell different during your monthly cycle. That is normal. If you have an odor that does not go away after washing, check with your doctor or nurse.
Douching after sex does not prevent pregnancy. In fact, it may make fertilization easier by pushing the sperm farther up the vagina.

Women who douche may have more of a chance of getting pelvic inflammatory disease (PID).

- Avoid tight pants, panties or panty hose without a cotton crotch, and other clothing that can trap moisture.
- Do not rely on home remedies. These remedies or douches may appear to get rid of the problem, but may only hide it.
- Use condoms to protect yourself from sexually transmitted infections.

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.