



Vaginal Discharge

What is a vaginal discharge?

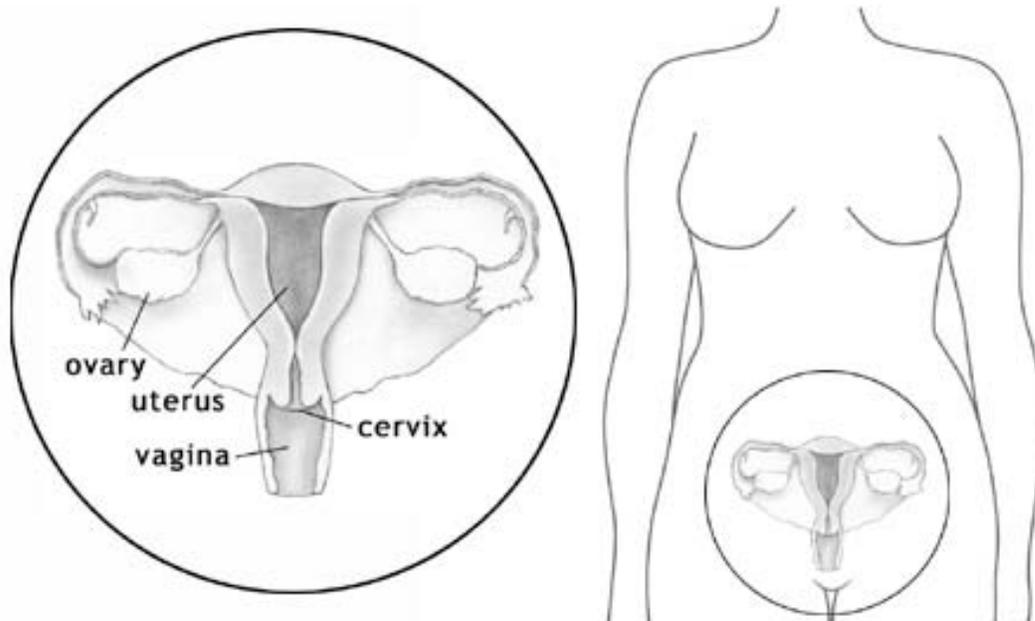
A discharge is a fluid released from a hollow space, like the vagina. The vagina is a tube 8-12 cm (4-6 inches) long. It opens at the lips of the vulva and is closed at the inner end by the cervix (the opening of the uterus or womb). Wetness in the vagina is produced by mucus from the cervix and the vaginal wall during sexual arousal. Many different bacteria, yeasts and parasites (microscopic forms of life, or 'bugs') live normally in the vagina without causing symptoms. The vagina is usually acidic because the normal bacteria produce lactic acid. Normal bacteria help the vagina protect itself from the kinds of bacteria that cause disease. Candida (yeast) can live in the vagina in low numbers without causing any symptoms.

Some health issues affect changes in vaginal discharge. For example, pregnancy is associated with an increase in normal discharge; The cervical mucus is thick and clear in color. Some changes in the immune system (the body's ability to protect itself), such as diabetes, pregnancy, HIV infection, and the use of antibiotics, can upset the normal bacteria; these changes increase the chance of Candida (yeast) becoming a problem. In most women with recurrent Candida infection, no underlying problem is found; it may be related to weaker immunity in the vagina, which explains why it frequently recurs, even with recommended treatment.

What is the cause?

Normal Discharge

Normal discharge is caused by mucus produced by the cervix. A woman may notice changes in the amount of discharge throughout the menstrual cycle; this is normal, and is due to the changing levels of female hormones. Many women notice an increase around the time of ovulation. Sometimes the amount of mucus is greater than a person would like, especially on oral contraception pills or during pregnancy, but this does not mean there is anything wrong. This discharge does not cause itch, but it may cause discomfort if the woman feels wet all the time.



Abnormal Discharge

Abnormal discharge is caused by a variety of infections and inflammations.

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is caused by some types of normal bacteria when they are present in large numbers (these are good bugs when present in small numbers). BV is not sexually transmitted.

Candidiasis is caused by too much yeast. It is rarely sexually transmitted.

Trichomoniasis (TV) is caused by a sexually transmitted parasite (bad bug).

Chlamydia and gonorrhoea, are sexually transmitted bacterial infections.

Desquamative inflammatory vaginitis is a rare condition that produces a pus-like discharge. The cause is unknown. It is not sexually transmitted.

What does it feel like?

Normal discharge just feels wet. There is no discomfort.

Abnormal discharge may cause irritation, itching, rawness, burning with urination, or pain with sex.

Bacterial vaginosis does not usually cause discomfort, but can cause mild irritation with sex, and a fishy odor.

Candidiasis can make the skin itchy, swollen, red and sore.

Trichomoniasis can cause itch and pain during urination.

Gonorrhoea and Chlamydia may cause pain with urination and with sex, as well as bleeding

between periods or after sex.

What does it look like?

Normal discharge can be variable but is usually clear or white. Abnormal discharge comes in a variety of colors (white, cream, green, grey, yellow), consistencies (creamy, chunky, watery), amount, and odor. A sudden change in your discharge may signal infection or inflammation, and you should see your health care provider.

How is it diagnosed?

The correct diagnosis cannot be made by just looking at the discharge. Infections are diagnosed by taking appropriate samples; this usually involves taking swabs from the vagina or cervix, urine samples or other diagnostic tests.

How is it treated?

Normal discharge does not require treatment.

Discharge associated with an infection should be treated with medications targeting the specific infection.

If you have chlamydia, gonorrhea, or trichomoniasis, your sexual partner(s) must also be tested and treated, even if they don't have symptoms; this includes partners with whom you are no longer having sex, otherwise, their other partners may become infected.

Do not try to treat yourself. Many treatments that you read on the internet are not effective. Douching and lactobacilli tablets are not useful treatments.

If you are not sure whether your discharge is normal, talk to your health care provider. If you have a fever or pain as well as a discharge, seek care immediately, as this could mean a serious infection.

International Society for the Study of Vulvovaginal Disease

Patient Information Committee

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