

Vaginal Discharge and Vaginitis

What is vaginal discharge?

The **vagina** is a canal that connects the **uterus** (the womb) to the **vulva** (the outer female genitals). **Vaginal discharge** is fluid created by mucus from the **cervix** (the part of the uterus that connects the uterus to the vagina) that comes out of your vagina. You might notice vaginal discharge on your underwear.

- Normal vaginal discharge is clear or white in color and doesn't cause other symptoms such as itching, burning, or pain.
- The thickness or amount of discharge you have can change throughout your **menstrual cycle** (your monthly period).

What would abnormal vaginal discharge look like?

If your discharge changes in color or thickness, it could be abnormal. Contact your doctor if you have any of these signs of abnormal vaginal discharge:

- Yellow or green discharge
- Thick or clumpy discharge
- Increased discharge (more discharge than normal)
- Discharge that has a new, bad smell

What is vaginitis?

Vaginitis is inflammation (swelling, redness, and irritation) or an infection of the vagina.

What are the symptoms of vaginitis?

Vaginitis symptoms may be different from person to person. Symptoms may include:

- A feeling of itching, pain, or burning around your vagina
- Pain with urination (peeing)
- An abnormal vaginal discharge (discharge that is yellow, green, thick or clumpy, or smells bad)
- Your vagina or vulva is red and may be sore to the touch

What are the possible causes of vaginitis?

The possible causes of vaginitis include infections, autoimmune diseases, inflammation, hormonal conditions, and contact dermatitis.

Infections

Possible infections that may cause vaginitis include:

- Yeast
- Bacterial vaginosis (an infection that causes normal bacteria in your vagina to overgrow)
- Herpes (herpes simplex virus)
- Trichomoniasis (“trich”)
- Gonorrhea
- Chlamydia
- Streptococcus (“strep”)

Please note that herpes, trichomoniasis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia are **sexually transmitted infections (STIs)**, meaning that the infections can be spread from one person to another through sexual activity. If you are diagnosed with these infections as a cause of your vaginitis, you will need to let any sexual partners know so that they can be treated as well.

Autoimmune diseases

Autoimmune diseases are those where your cells that normally attack bacteria and viruses mistakenly attack your own healthy cells. Some autoimmune conditions that can cause vaginitis include:

- Erosive lichen planus
- Pemphigus

Inflammation

Inflammation is the body's response to injury, infection, or disease. The 4 signs of inflammation are redness, heat, swelling, and pain. Some inflammatory conditions can cause vaginitis, such as **desquamative inflammatory vaginitis (DIV)**. DIV is a rare condition where inflammatory changes in the vagina cause an increase in vaginal discharge that is yellow in color with vaginal burning or discomfort. We don't fully understand what causes DIV.

Hormonal changes

Hormonal changes, particularly changes related to decreased estrogen, can cause vaginitis. This is more common for those in menopause, people who are on hormonal medications for breast cancer, or people who are breastfeeding. Vaginitis caused by decreased estrogen is called **atrophic vaginitis**.

Contact dermatitis

If your skin touches a product that you are allergic to or a product that is too harsh, it may cause a reaction called **contact dermatitis** which can lead to vaginitis (for example, using a soap on your vulva with harsh ingredients or ingredients that you are allergic to).

How is abnormal vaginal discharge and vaginitis diagnosed?

- Your healthcare provider will look at the skin on the outside of your body (the vulva) as well as look inside your vagina with a **speculum**. A speculum is a medical instrument that allows your provider to look inside the vagina. The provider may take a swab and look under a microscope to see if you have an infection. In some cases they may send a vaginal swab (culture) to the lab for testing.
- If your provider thinks an STI may be causing abnormal discharge or vaginitis, they may offer you STI testing.

What is the treatment for abnormal vaginal discharge and vaginitis?

Your treatment options are based on what is causing the abnormal vaginal discharge or vaginitis. Below is information on treatment options for different causes of abnormal vaginal discharge or vaginitis.

Infection

Depending on the cause of the infection, typically you will be treated with an oral or topical antibiotic or antifungal medication. **Oral medication** is something that is swallowed by mouth, such as a pill. **Topical medication** is something that is put on the skin, like a cream or ointment.

- Bacterial vaginosis is treated with either an oral or topical antibiotic.
- Yeast infections are usually treated with an oral or topical antifungal medication.
- Sometimes these infections may be treated with boric acid vaginal **suppositories** (medication that is inserted into your vagina). This medication must only to be used in the vagina, as they can kill you if swallowed. This medication must be kept away from children.

Autoimmune disease

Vaginitis from autoimmune diseases like lichen planus is treated with a very strong steroid medication (either a cream or suppository you put inside your vagina).

Inflammation

- Desquamative inflammatory vaginitis is treated with an antibiotic cream (clindamycin) that you put into the vagina.
- The other option for treatment is a compounded steroid cream (hydrocortisone) that you put into the vagina. **Compounded medications** are medications that are mixed at a specialty pharmacy and not available at a regular pharmacy. Your provider may prescribe this for you. Sometimes clindamycin is combined with a steroid cream made by a specialty compounding pharmacy.



Hormonal changes

- For those that have atrophic vaginitis, or vaginitis symptoms due to a decrease in estrogen, the typical treatment is vaginal estrogen. There are different kinds of vaginal estrogen products including creams, suppositories, and a long-acting silicone ring. We will help you choose one to start with.
- Some people have concerns about cancer risks with hormonal medications. Research has shown that using vaginal estrogen does not increase the risk of getting breast or uterine cancer in people with no personal history of these cancers.

Contact dermatitis

The first thing to do is to stop using the product that is causing the reaction. You may also use a steroid medication to decrease inflammation.

Where can I find more information on abnormal vaginal discharge and vaginitis?

Resource	QR code
International Society for the Study of Vulvovaginal Disease Patient Education www.issvd.org/resources/vaginal-discharge	
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/default.htm	

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