SYMPTOM

# Vaginal itching and discharge - adult and adolescent

Vaginal itching and discharge are changes in comfort or vaginal fluid that may be normal or need assessment.

**WHAT IT FEELS LIKE**
Itching with unusual wetness, odor, burning, or soreness

**WHERE IT IS FELT**
The vulva outside and vagina inside

**MOST COMMON CAUSES**
Normal discharge, yeast infection, bacterial vaginosis

**WHEN IT IS URGENT**
Fever with lower abdominal pain, or severe worsening pain

**USUALLY LASTS**
Days to weeks, depending on the cause and treatment

**SEE A DOCTOR IF**
Discharge is new, persistent, recurrent, strong-smelling, bloody, or painful

## Overview

Vaginal discharge is fluid that leaves the vagina. Some discharge is normal, especially during puberty, around ovulation, during pregnancy, or with sexual arousal. Normal discharge is usually clear or white and does not cause strong odor, pain, or significant itching.

Itching often affects the vulva, the external skin around the vaginal opening. It may occur with changes in discharge, but the two symptoms can also have different causes.

Color or texture alone cannot confirm a diagnosis. Infections, skin irritation, hormonal changes, and objects left in the vagina can cause similar symptoms.

## What it may feel or look like

You may notice itching, burning, redness, swelling, soreness, or small cracks in the vulvar skin. Urine may sting when it touches irritated skin. Sex or inserting a tampon may be uncomfortable.

Discharge may be thinner, thicker, or more plentiful than usual. It can appear clear, white, gray, yellow, green, or blood-stained. It may have little odor or a strong, unpleasant, or fish-like smell.

Certain patterns may suggest a cause, but they are not reliable enough for self-diagnosis. For example, yeast can cause thick white discharge with intense itching, while bacterial vaginosis often causes thin discharge with a fish-like odor. Either condition may look different from this.

## Common causes

Common causes include:

Sexually transmitted infections, including trichomoniasis, chlamydia, and gonorrhea, can cause unusual discharge, pain when urinating, bleeding between periods, or pelvic pain. They may also cause no symptoms. Having these symptoms does not mean you have a sexually transmitted infection.

Less common causes include eczema and other skin conditions, low estrogen levels, or an object in the vagina. A retained tampon can cause strong-smelling or bloody discharge. After menopause, lower estrogen can make vaginal tissues dry, thin, and easily irritated.

- Normal vaginal discharge: Clear or white fluid that changes with hormones and does not cause strong odor or irritation
- Yeast infection: An overgrowth of Candida yeast, often causing itching, redness, and thick white discharge
- Bacterial vaginosis: A change in the usual balance of vaginal bacteria, often causing thin gray or white discharge and a fish-like odor
- Irritation: Reactions to scented soaps, wipes, pads, detergents, lubricants, condoms, or tight and damp clothing

## When to seek medical care

Arrange a routine appointment if this is your first episode, the cause is uncertain, symptoms persist or return, or discharge has a new odor, color, or texture. You should also book an appointment for bleeding after sex, genital sores, pain during sex, or possible exposure to a sexually transmitted infection.

Seek same-day medical advice if you have:

Get emergency help for severe abdominal pain with fainting, marked dizziness, shoulder-tip pain, or heavy bleeding, especially if pregnancy is possible. Fever, rash, vomiting, or dizziness

while using a tampon also needs emergency assessment because it can rarely signal a serious illness.

Adolescents can ask how privacy works before sharing personal information. Healthcare professionals should explain any limits to confidentiality.

- Fever with lower abdominal or pelvic pain
- Worsening pain, vomiting, or feeling significantly unwell
- Foul-smelling discharge with a tampon or another object that cannot be removed
- Symptoms during pregnancy with bleeding, pain, fever, or possible leaking fluid

## How the cause is found

A healthcare professional may ask when symptoms began, what the discharge looks and smells like, whether symptoms relate to periods, and whether you have used new products or medicines. Questions about pregnancy and sexual contact help guide appropriate testing and should be asked respectfully.

An examination may include looking at the external skin. An internal examination is not always needed. With your consent, a sample of discharge may be collected with a swab. Some clinics offer self-collected vaginal swabs.

Testing may check vaginal acidity, yeast, bacterial changes, or sexually transmitted infections. A urine or pregnancy test may also be appropriate. More than one cause can be present at the same time.

## Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Normal discharge needs no treatment. Antifungal medicine may be used for yeast, while bacterial vaginosis, trichomoniasis, and some other infections require specific antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline . Sexually transmitted infections may also require testing or treatment for sexual partners.

Avoid assuming every itchy discharge is yeast. Using the wrong treatment can delay the correct diagnosis or further irritate the skin. If you are pregnant, check with a healthcare professional before using vaginal or oral treatments.

While waiting for assessment or recovery:

Do not try to remove a deeply retained object with tools. Seek medical help if gentle removal is

not easy.

- Wash the vulva gently with lukewarm water and pat dry
- Avoid douching, scented washes, deodorants, and fragranced wipes
- Wear breathable underwear and change out of damp clothing
- Avoid inserting home remedies, including yogurt or essential oils
- Pause sex if it is painful or until infection testing is complete

## What to expect

Irritation may improve after the triggering product is stopped. Infections usually settle with treatment aimed at the specific cause, although yeast and bacterial vaginosis can return.

Use prescribed treatment as directed, even if symptoms improve early. Arrange follow-up if symptoms do not improve, return soon after treatment, or change in character. Further testing may be needed rather than repeating the same treatment.

## Common questions

Is white discharge normal?

It can be. Normal discharge is often clear or white and may become thicker or more noticeable at certain times in the menstrual cycle. Strong odor, itching, pain, or bleeding makes assessment more important.

Does itching always mean a yeast infection?

No. Yeast is common, but bacterial changes, skin irritation, sexually transmitted infections, and skin conditions can also itch. Symptoms alone may not separate them.

Can I use an over-the-counter yeast treatment?

If a healthcare professional previously confirmed yeast and the symptoms are identical, a pharmacist can help you choose an appropriate product. Seek assessment for a first episode, pregnancy, repeated symptoms, pelvic pain, fever, sores, or uncertain symptoms.

Can these symptoms occur without sexual contact?

Yes. Normal hormonal discharge, yeast, bacterial vaginosis, irritation, and skin conditions do not require sexual contact. Some infections are sexually transmitted, so testing may still be offered when relevant.

Should I remove discharge by douching?

No. The vagina cleans itself. Douching can disturb its usual bacteria and may worsen irritation or odor. Clean only the external vulvar skin gently.

## Sources

- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists: Vaginitis
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Bacterial Vaginosis - STI Treatment Guidelines
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Vulvovaginal Candidiasis - STI Treatment Guidelines
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Trichomoniasis - STI Treatment Guidelines
- NHS: Vaginal discharge