

Vaginitis: Conditions, Causes, and Treatment

What is vaginitis?

Vaginitis is a term that refers to a number of conditions, including infection, inflammation, and a change in flora (naturally-occurring microorganisms) balance of the vagina. While each condition may have a different cause, there are common factors that can increase the risk for vaginitis.

What conditions are commonly associated with vaginitis and how are they treated?

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) is caused by a change in the balance of normally-occurring bacteria in the vagina. It is unclear what causes this shift but having multiple or new sex partners, douching, not using condoms, using an intrauterine device (IUD), and smoking can increase the risk.

- Symptoms include: thin, discolored, and fishy-smelling discharge; vaginal pain, itching, or burning, especially when urinating or having sex.
- Treatment: In some cases, BV may go away without treatment; however, antibiotics, given in oral form or as a gel applied to the vagina, are often necessary. Finishing a prescribed course of antibiotics, even if symptoms go away before completing the course, will help ensure that BV is properly treated.

Yeast infections, or vaginal candidiasis, occur when there is an overgrowth of the normally occurring microorganisms found naturally in the vagina and the gastrointestinal tract. This infection is very common for people with vaginas and is not sexually transmitted. Taking antibiotics; hormonal contraceptives or using contraceptive devices; having a weakened immune system (e.g., associated with HIV, chronic steroid use, chemotherapy); being pregnant; or having uncontrolled diabetes can increase the risk for a yeast infection.

- Symptoms include: itching or irritation of the vulva; pain with urination; vulvar redness, soreness, or swelling; pain during sex; white, clumpy, or watery vaginal discharge.
- Treatment: Both vaginal and oral antifungal medications are available. Over-the-counter treatments are also available; however, a health care provider can more accurately diagnose and treat for the cause of any symptoms.

Cytolytic Vaginosis, also called lactobacillus overgrowth syndrome, is caused by an overgrowth of bacteria that normally occur in the vagina. It is not an infection and is not sexually transmitted.

- Symptoms include: external vaginal itching (notably around the vaginal opening); burning sensation during urination or sex; and white discharge. Symptoms may be cyclical, often worsening before the menstrual period starts and lessens during and afterward.
- Treatment: Self-care is recommended and does not require the use of any antibiotic or anti-fungal medications (because it is not an infection). A baking soda sitz bath may help: dissolve 3 tablespoons of baking soda into a warm bath and soak for 15-20 minutes up to 2 times per day every month as needed for symptom relief. If symptoms do not improve in 2-3 weeks, it is wise to follow up with a health care provider.

How can I prevent vaginitis?

Avoiding scented bath and menstrual products used in or around the vagina is advised. Wiping front to back after having a bowel movement or urinating can reduce the risk of transferring bacteria to the vagina that may result in vaginitis. Using barrier methods during sex (e.g., condoms and dental dams) can reduce the risk of sexually transmitted infections. Additionally, wearing cotton underwear and avoiding the use of douches can also reduce risk.

How can I address vaginitis at Medical Services?

Students can make an appointment with Medical Services to address symptoms associated with vaginitis. Costs associated with the visit and any lab tests to determine a diagnosis are typically covered with the Columbia Health and Related Services fee (HRSF) at no extra cost. Students who have not paid the HRSF can pay out-of-pocket for the visit and associated costs. They can then submit the charges for reimbursement through their health insurance plan if they have health insurance.

Online & Off-Campus Resources

Go Ask Alice!: goaskalice.columbia.edu

On-Campus Resources

Medical Services: 212-854-7426

health.columbia.edu/content/medical-services