

Vaginitis: General Information

What is vaginitis? What are the symptoms?

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. Generally, symptoms can include atypical vagina discharge (including change in the color, amount, and smell), itching, pain during vaginal sex or urination, and light vaginal bleeding. While each specific condition may have a different cause, there are a few common factors that contribute, including the use of antibiotics, spermicide, or douches; changes in hormone due to pregnancy or menopause; and sexual contact. Beyond those factors, wearing damp and tight clothes, having diabetes that is not adequately managed, having an IUD (intrauterine device), and using scented products near the vulva and vagina may also increase the risk of vaginitis.

The most common conditions include:

- *Bacterial vaginosis is caused by an imbalance of the bacteria typically found within the vagina.*
- *Yeast infections are a result of an overgrowth of naturally-occurring yeast (Candida albicans) in the vagina.*
- *Trichomoniasis infection is due to a small parasite (protozoa) that is typically transmitted through sexual contact.*
- *Increase in normal vaginal discharge not caused by an infection. Which might be linked to menstrual cycle, sexual activity, hormonal contraception, pregnancy, stress and diet changes. (This is sometimes called Cytolytic vaginosis)*

How is vaginitis diagnosed? How is it treated?

Several conditions related to vaginitis will require a visit to a health care provider for diagnosis and treatment. The provider will ask questions about health history, including any previous vaginal or sexually transmitted infections. Then, they will also likely perform a pelvic exam, using a speculum (which is inserted into the vagina to aid in the exam), and take a sample of any discharge if needed. A test to determine the pH level of the vagina may also be indicated. In the case of a positive diagnosis, many of the conditions are treated with prescription medication that may be taken orally in pill form, or a suppository or gel that is placed in or around the vagina. Regardless of what is prescribed, taking the full course of medication as indicated is critical to successful treatment. If there is no pathogen associated with the vaginitis, avoiding irritants (e.g., scented detergents, sprays, soaps, or menstrual products) may be advised.

For those who have had a yeast infection before and recognize related symptoms again, over-the-counter (OTC) treatments may be helpful. However, if a yeast infection is not the cause for the symptoms, treating with OTC medications may not help and can further delay proper and effective treatment. For those who are unsure or have never had a yeast infection before, seeing a health care provider is recommended.

How can I address vaginitis at Medical Services?

If you have vaginal symptoms students can make an appointment for a women's health exam with Medical Services in person, by calling, or by requesting one online on the Columbia Health website.

Those who would like to make an appointment for a women's health exam with Medical Services, but do not have either the Columbia Student Health Insurance plan or another insurance plan will need to either:

- Get coverage by reviewing health care exchange options on healthcare.gov or by requesting enrollment in student health insurance plan during the open enrollment period, OR
- Pay out-of-pocket for the service.

How can I prevent vaginitis?

There are a number of actions that can be taken to prevent vaginitis. Avoiding scented bath and menstrual products used in or around the vagina is advised. After having a bowel movement or urinating, wiping front to back can reduce the risk of transferring bacteria to the vagina that may result in vaginitis. Using barrier methods during sex, such as condoms and dental dams, can reduce the risk of sexually transmitted infections. Avoid use of self-treatment or products in and around the vagina including douching or feminine hygiene wash.

Online & Off-Campus Resources

Go Ask Alice!: goaskalice.columbia.edu

On-Campus Resources

Medical Services: 212-854-7426

health.columbia.edu/content/medical-services

Women's Health Advocacy Project (WHAP)