



Vaginal Health

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The vagina is an elastic, muscular canal with a soft, flexible lining that provides lubrication and sensation. The vagina connects the uterus to the outside world. The vulva and labia form the entrance, and the cervix of the uterus protrudes into the vagina, forming the interior end.

We are discussing three cases of vaginas gone wrong – Bacterial Vaginosis, Candida Vulvovaginitis, and Trichomoniasis. All three have simple treatments and sound much more sinister than they actually are.

Vaginas can regularly release a small amount of milky, whitish, or clear fluid daily. This fluid is made up of sloughed off cells from the vaginal lining (vaginal cells slough off just like your other skin cells). The color and consistency of the fluid can change with your menstrual cycle. Yes, it's true – the vagina is a self-cleaning organ. Every woman's "vaginal flora," as we medical folk call it, is made up of a personalized balance of different species of bacteria. Most vaginas are in a peaceful symbiosis with *Lactobacillus acidophilus* and *Staphylococcus epidermidis*.

Things go wrong when this delicate vaginal balance is disrupted. Here are some ways this could happen:

- **Douching**

We thought that people stopped doing this in the seventies, but it turns out that it is still popular in some social circles. A word from the wise: Don't do it! It's never a good idea – you are flooding your personal space with a bunch of annoying, irritating chemicals that will make your vagina unhappy and make it easier for that delicate balance to be disrupted. Also, if you have a STI, (and you might not even know it if you do) douching can push the evil bacteria into your uterus and fallopian tubes in an ugly, infectious tidal wave, making the problem much, much worse. The best way to clean down there is with some gentle soap and

water. Also falling into the “no no” category would be other irritants such as hygiene sprays, bubble baths, and perfumed detergents.

- **Antibiotics**

Taking antibiotics can kill the healthy bacteria your vagina likes and needs, making room for other bacteria or yeast that your vagina hates. But of course, this isn't a reason for not taking antibiotics if you really need them.

- **Contraception**

Oral contraceptive pills, IUD's, condoms, and spermicide (especially nonoxynol-9) have been associated with increased yeast infections. Once again, this is not a good reason to stop using contraception – yeast infections, though annoying, are much less annoying than unwanted babies and incurable STD's.

- **Health conditions**

Diabetes, pregnancy, or infections can mess with your vaginal flora.

- **Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)**

BV is a very common cause of vaginal annoyance – a third of women who visit their doctor complaining of a vaginal issue end up being diagnosed with BV. Although almost half of women with BV have no symptoms at all, most complain of a fishy-smelling discharge that can be yellow, creamy white, green, or gray (have we ruined your appetite yet? Our sincere apologies). They can also have some minor itching. No one knows the exact cause of BV, but we know that somehow there is an overgrowth of new, annoying bacteria in the vagina, usually *Gardnerella vaginalis*, *Mobiluncus*, or *Mycoplasma hominis* (the can be seen in the picture to the right...the little dark spots mixed in with the large healthy cells are the unwanted intruders). BV can be more likely to rear its ugly head when a woman has been involved with a new sexual partner, and studies have shown a concordance of BV between lesbian partners; however, there is no clear evidence that it is sexually transmitted.

- **Candida Vulvovaginitis** (term for a yeast infection)

Candida is a type of yeast that many women self-treat with over-the-counter creams but it is, in fact, less common than BV, accounting for about a quarter of the women who come to the doctor with vaginal symptoms. Women with yeast infections often have a thick, curd-like white discharge that kind of smells, well, yeasty. Unlike BV, yeast infections can make your vagina and vulva notably painful, itchy, and red. As we said before, many women will try over-the-counter creams but, if for some reason the symptoms persist or come back, it is important to see a doctor and make sure there isn't something more serious going on.

Studies have shown that most women aren't very good at diagnosing yeast infections on their own so don't hesitate to go in for a check-up if you're unsure.

- **Trichomoniasis**

Trichomoniasis is caused by a little protozoan with a tail (named Trichomonas) that swims around in seminal or vaginal fluid, causing mischief. Trichomonas, although cute, is without a doubt an STI, and can be easily prevented by wearing condoms with every sexual encounter. Trichomonas can live on objects like sex toys and towels and can also be found in urine. Women with Trichomoniasis usually have a significant amount of thin, discolored, foamy discharge, as well as a strange odor and itching. When the infection gets really bad, it can cause fever and lower abdominal pain (but these can be symptoms of other serious infections as well). Trichomonas also likes company – a third of women who have it will have another STI at the same time.

Vagina have their own natural balance of bacteria and anything that disrupts that delicate balance can cause itching, discharge, or odor. With a quick swab of vagina and examination via microscope or laboratory doctors diagnose the problem and treat it accordingly. All three conditions can be cured quite easily.