



Female Genital Health & Hygiene



The vagina is a complex environment of healthy bacteria, temperature, and moisture. Sometimes when one of these factors changes, the body's natural balance can be disturbed and an infection can occur. This can be related to sexual activity, but there are lots of other reasons too. Routine hygiene is really important in preventing these infections, but remember, don't over-wash your vulva because this can throw your body chemistry off too! Some people are naturally more prone (likely) to getting these infections than other people. Bacterial infections are common and generally easy to treat, but when left untreated they can lead to more serious conditions, especially if you are pregnant. So know your body and take good care of it!

Yeast Infections



Yeast Infections are caused by an overgrowth of a fungus called *candida* that naturally lives in the body. Symptoms include itchiness and irritation of the vulva (outer vagina), and an odorless, lumpy white discharge. Not all women will have the same exact symptoms, so when in doubt: ask your health-care provider.

It is healthy to wear "breathable" underwear (100% cotton!) and to use *mild* soap (avoid perfumes and dyes, as they can irritate the vagina) to wash the outside of the vagina. It is not necessary to wash the inside, in fact douching* can increase risk of infection. Antibiotics may also create imbalance in a woman's flora (her body's unique balance of healthy bacteria). Pregnant women are especially prone to getting yeast infections.

You can treat yeast infections with an over-the-counter cream or prescription pills. However, it is *always* a good idea to check with your health care provider first. If you are sexually active, do not engage in sexual activity until the infection is *totally* cured, or your partner may contract it and re-infect you. Yeast infections are very common and are not usually sexually transmitted.

Every Day

- WEAR cotton underwear and dry clothes that aren't too tight and never share underwear or bathing suits with other people
- CHANGE out of wet bathing suit or work out clothing as soon as possible
- WASH outside the vagina using mild soap only
- DO NOT use a douche* (see below)
- AVOID sanitary sprays, suppositories, scented or colored pads or tampons, and bubble bath or toilet paper that contains perfume
- EAT a balanced diet and avoid excess sugars for optimal health and vaginal comfort
- ABSTAIN from sexual activity until your infection is completely cured to avoid re-infecting yourself

Good to know...

At most family planning clinics checkups are FREE for teens age 17 and younger. Although it's always a good idea to talk to your parents about your sexual health needs, it is not possible for every family. You do NOT need your parent or guardian's permission to go to a public health or family planning clinic.

Remember...

Unusual discharge, itchiness, burning, soreness, and unusual foul odor of the vagina may result from a *number* of conditions, including gonorrhea, chlamydia, trichomoniasis, BV, yeast infections, UTIs and other infections, so it is important to **get checked** by a health care provider to make sure you **get the right treatment**.

Bacterial Vaginosis



Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) is caused by an overgrowth of bacteria that naturally live in the vagina. While most women show no symptoms at all, BV can produce a fishy-smelling grey discharge. The risk of developing BV increases with: douching*, cigarette smoking, or multiple partners (although a woman can develop BV without any sexual contact). BV is cured with antibiotics, in pill or gel form. Yogurt and probiotics also help. Recurrent symptoms are common. If you are sexually active, do not engage in sexual activity until the infection is *totally* cured and you've completed your prescription.

Urinary Tract Infection



Urinary Tract Infections (UTI) are a common condition caused by bacteria in the urethra (where urine exits the body), and are characterized by a frequent urge to urinate (pee) and a painful burning during urination. Some women are more likely to get UTIs than others, and 1 out of 5 women are affected.

It is healthy to urinate before and after sexual intercourse, as the flow of urine can help clear away bacteria that may have collected in the urethra. After using the restroom, you can wipe yourself from front to back (wiping *away* from the urethra) to avoid bringing bacteria from the anus toward the urethra.

UTIs can be cured with antibiotics. Drinking water also helps. Recurrence is common. An untreated UTI may develop into a more severe condition if it spreads to the bladder and kidneys, so get treatment!

Caution...

*A **douche** is any liquid a woman flushes into the vagina in order to "clean" the inside. In fact, it is *not* healthy to douche because it throws off the delicate balance of healthy bacteria in the vagina and can push harmful bacteria further into a woman's body. Also, a douche can dry out and irritate the sensitive vaginal walls, which increases risk of abrasions (cuts and scratches) and infection. Also, anal douching is not recommended for women or men.

The vagina cleans and lubricates itself daily by secreting a small amount of fluid called **discharge**. This keeps it healthy and clean. Discharge is clear or whitish and has a light scent. If your discharge is a very different color or smell from how it normally is, this may indicate an infection, when in doubt ask a doctor or call the hotline!

CHOICE

This fact sheet was produced by CHOICE.

For more information about sexual health and the body call **215-985-3300** or visit www.choice-phil.org, www.choiceteens.org, and www.wheretofind.org.