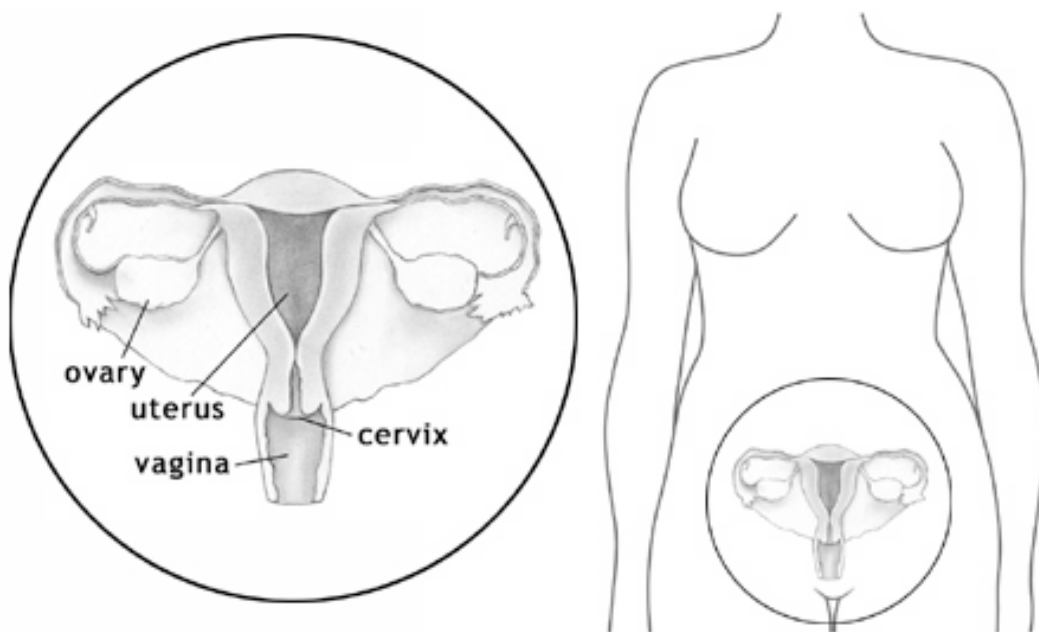


Vaginal Discharge



What is a vaginal discharge?

A discharge is a fluid released from a hollow space like the vagina. The vagina is a tube 8-12 cm long. It opens at the lips of the vulva and is closed at the inner end by the cervix (the opening of the uterus or womb). Wetness in the vagina is produced by mucus from the cervix and from the vaginal wall during sexual arousal. Many different bacteria, yeasts and parasites (microscopic forms of life or 'bugs') live normally in the vagina without causing symptoms. The vagina is usually acidic because the normal bacteria produce lactic acid. Normal bacteria help the vagina protect itself from the kinds of bacteria that cause disease. Candida (yeast) can live in the vagina in low numbers without causing any symptoms.

Some other health issues affect changes in vaginal discharge. Pregnancy is associated with an increase in normal discharge. The cervical mucus is thick and clear in color. Some changes in the immune system (the body's ability to protect itself) such as diabetes, pregnancy, HIV infection and the use of antibiotics can upset the normal bacteria. These changes increase the chance of Candida (yeast) becoming a problem. In most women with recurrent Candida infection, no underlying problem is found. It may be related to a problem with weaker immunity in the vagina, which explains why it frequently recurs, even with recommended treatment.

What is the cause?

Discharge from the cervix

- *Normal discharge* is caused by mucus, produced by the cervix. A woman may notice changes in the amount of discharge throughout the menstrual

cycle. This is normal, and is due to the changing levels of female hormones. Many women notice an increase around the time of ovulation. Sometimes the amount of mucus is greater than the person would like, especially on oral contraception pills or during pregnancy, but this does not mean there is anything wrong. This discharge does not cause itch, but it may cause discomfort if the woman feels wet all the time.

- A change in the discharge may be caused by *Chlamydia* and *gonorrhoea*, which are sexually transmitted infections.

Discharge from the vagina

- *Bacterial vaginosis (BV)* is caused by some types of normal bacteria when they are present in large numbers (these are good bugs when present in small numbers). BV is not sexually transmitted.
- *Candidiasis* is caused by too much yeast. It is rarely sexually transmitted.
- *Trichomoniasis (TV)* is caused by a sexually transmitted parasite (bad bug).
- Desquamative inflammatory vaginitis is a rare condition that produces a pus-like discharge. The cause is unknown. It is not sexually transmitted.

What does it feel like?

- Normal discharge just feels wet. There is no discomfort.
- *Gonorrhoea* and *Chlamydia* may cause an infection in the tubes and ovaries that can lead to pelvic pain. They may also cause pain on passing urine, and bleeding between periods or after sex.
- *Trichomoniasis* can cause itch and pain passing urine.
- *Bacterial vaginosis* does not usually cause discomfort, but can cause mild irritation with sex, and a fishy odor.
- *Candidiasis* can make the skin itchy, swollen, red and sore.

What does it look like?

Normal discharge can be variable but is usually clear or white. Infections may cause discharge of varying color, consistency, amount and odor. A sudden change in your discharge may signify infection or inflammation, and you should see your health care provider.

How is it diagnosed?

The correct diagnosis cannot be made by just looking at the discharge. Infections are diagnosed by taking appropriate samples. This usually involves taking swabs from the vagina or cervix, urine samples or other diagnostic tests.

How is it treated?

Normal discharge needs no treatment.

Discharge associated with infections should respond to the specific treatment for that infection.

If you have gonorrhoea, chlamydia, or trichomoniasis, your sexual partner/s must also be tested and treated. Treatment should start right away because partners may have no symptoms. All sexual partners should be tested and treated, even if you are not having sex with them any more. Otherwise you and their other partners may become re-infected.

Douching and lactobacillus tablets are not useful as treatments. Do not try to treat yourself.

If you are not sure whether your discharge is normal, talk to your health care provider. If you have fever or pain as well as a discharge, see your health care provider urgently as this could mean a serious infection.