

## PATIENT RESOURCES

### Vaginal Discharge

#### What is vaginal discharge?

Vaginal discharge is the term for fluid or mucus that comes from the vagina. Vaginal discharge is not usually noticeable until it exits the vagina. Vaginal discharge is a common concern, and a frequent reason why many people see their doctor. Some amount of vaginal discharge is normal, unless it occurs with itching, burning, or other bothersome symptoms. Most experts recommend an examination to determine the cause, because different causes can have similar symptoms.

#### Is my vaginal discharge normal?

Normal vaginal discharge is made by the skin cells of the vagina and cervix under the influence of the hormone, estrogen. After menopause vaginal discharge may be minimal as a result of lower levels of estrogen. Before menopause, it is normal to have about one-half to one teaspoon (2 to 5 mL) of white or clear, thick, mucus-like, and mostly odorless vaginal discharge every day. However, the amount and consistency of the discharge varies from person to person. The amount can also vary at different times during the menstrual cycle. It may become more noticeable at certain times, such as during pregnancy, with use of birth control pills/patch/vaginal ring, near ovulation, and in the week before the menstrual period.

Normally, discharge contains vaginal skin cells, bacteria, mucus and fluid produced by the vagina and cervix. A normal discharge often has a slight odor. This discharge helps to protect the vaginal and urinary tract against infections and provides lubrication to the vaginal tissues.

#### When to seek help for vaginal discharge

Vaginal discharge is common and normal. However, vaginal discharge with the following signs and symptoms is not normal and should be evaluated by a provider:

- Itching of the vulva, vaginal opening, or labia
- Redness, burning, soreness, or swelling of the vulvar skin
- Foamy or greenish-yellow discharge
- Bad odor
- Blood-tinged vaginal discharge
- Pain with intercourse or urination
- Abdominal or pelvic pain

#### Causes of abnormal vaginal discharge

The most common causes of vaginal discharge include:

- Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)
- Yeast infection
- Trichomoniasis or other sexually transmitted infections.

## Vaginal Discharge (continued)

- The body's reaction to a foreign body (such as a forgotten tampon or condom) or substance (such as spermicide, soap).
- Changes that occur after menopause can cause vaginal dryness, especially during sex, as well as a watery vaginal discharge or other symptoms.

### Do I need to be examined?

Yes! It is not possible to know if vaginal discharge is normal or not without an examination. A physical examination is the most accurate way of determining the cause of abnormal vaginal discharge. Do not begin treatment at home before being examined because self-treatment can make it more difficult to make an accurate diagnosis. During the examination, the provider will examine the entire outer genital area and will perform an internal examination. He/she may take a sample of the discharge to test for infection.

### Treatment

In many cases, it is possible to make a diagnosis and begin treatment immediately, based upon the examination. In other cases, the provider may recommend delaying treatment until lab test results are available.

Sexual partners of people with a sexually transmitted infection, such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, or trichomoniasis, need evaluation and treatment. For other infections, such as yeast or bacterial vaginosis, the sexual partner does not need treatment.

If treatment is needed, you should avoid having intercourse until the treatment is completed.

### Can I treat myself?

Many people would prefer to avoid seeing a provider. If all of the symptoms suggest a yeast infection to you, you may choose to use an over-the-counter treatment for yeast and see if it works. However, self-treatment can delay getting the correct diagnosis, be costly, or even cause worsened symptoms. In most cases, a physical examination should be performed before any treatment is used. In particular, you should not douche (rinse or wash the vagina) to get rid of the abnormal discharge because douching can make the discharge worse if it is due to an infection.

### Healthy vulvovaginal hygiene

Healthier practices include the following:

- Use water or unscented non-soap cleanser to wash genitalia, use warm (not hot) water and the hand (not a washcloth)
- Do not douche (rinse or wash the vagina) or use feminine hygiene products; if odor or discharge is bothersome, see a healthcare provider
- Avoid hot baths with scented products; plain warm water is preferred
- Wear cotton underwear
- Rinse genitals with water and/or pat dry after toileting; avoid use of baby wipes or scented toilet paper