



## The Lebanese Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology

### Women's health promotion series

## Vaginitis

Vaginitis is an **inflammation (irritation caused by an infection)** of a woman's vagina. It is one of the most common reasons why women seek medical care. Women from all ages are at risk of having vaginitis. There are many possible causes of vaginitis, and the type of treatment depends on the cause.

This pamphlet explains:

- Why vaginitis happens
- Symptoms of vaginitis
- Diagnosis and treatment
- How to reduce your risk of having vaginitis

### Why Vaginitis Occurs

A small amount of clear or cloudy white fluid normally passes daily from a woman's vagina. This fluid helps in keeping the vagina's tissue moisturized and healthy. It is normal for the amount and color of the **vaginal discharge (secretion of fluid from the vagina)** to change throughout the menstrual cycle.

The vagina also contains many organisms that are beneficial to its normal function these biological organisms include bacteria and yeast. A change in the normal balance of either yeast or bacteria can result in vaginitis.

Listed are some factors that can cause this imbalance between these two organisms in the vagina:

- constantly taking antibiotics and sometimes without a physician's prescription
- the changes that happen in the levels of hormones in a woman's body when she is pregnant, breastfeeding or at menopause
- washing the inside of the vagina with water (douching)
- the use of spermicides (substances used as contraceptive gels or creams during sexual intercourse to inactivate the sperms)
- Sexual intercourse
- Infection

If a change in the normal balance occurs, the tissues in the vagina may become inflamed. Vaginitis may cause itching, burning, a bad odor, or a large amount of discharge.

## Diagnosis and Treatment

To diagnose vaginitis, your gynecologist will take a sample of the discharge from your vagina and this sample will be tested to understand the reasons behind any unusual symptoms. Do not use any vaginal medication for at least 3 days before you see the doctor so that the results of the tests will not be affected. Also, do not douche (wash the inside of your vagina with water), do not have sexual intercourse and do not use spermicides before your clinical visit.

Treatment depends on the cause of the vaginitis. Treatment may be a pill taken orally or a cream that is inserted into the vagina. It is important to follow your health care provider's instructions exactly. Do not stop medication before the physician tells you to do so even if the symptoms go away because the infection could still be present. If symptoms do not go away after the treatment is finished, or if they return, contact your health care provider. A different treatment may be needed

## Types of Vaginitis

### *Yeast Infection*

A yeast infection also is known as **Candidiasis (an infection that is caused by the overgrowth of a type of fungi called Candida normally present in small number in the vagina)**. It is one of the most common types of vaginitis.

### **Why does it happen?**

It can be caused by the overuse of antibiotics. The antibiotics kill vaginal bacteria, which normally make sure that the yeast number does not increase significantly. When these bacteria die; an imbalance is created and the yeast can then overgrow. Pregnancy can increase the risk of yeast infection because of changes in the body's hormone levels. Women with **diabetes mellitus (a condition where the levels of sugar in the blood are too high)** also are at increased risk of having vaginitis.

Overgrowth of yeast can occur if the body's immune system (which protects the body from disease) is not working well. For example, in women infected with HIV, **human immunodeficiency virus (a virus that attacks certain cells and weakens the body's immune system)**, yeast infections may be severe. The symptoms may not go away, even with treatment, or may return. In many cases, the cause of a yeast infection is not known.

### **Symptoms.**

The most common symptoms of a yeast infection are itching and burning of the area outside the vagina called the **vulva**. The burning may be worse when the woman urinates or has sexual intercourse. The vulva may be red and swollen. Some women with yeast infections notice an

increase or a change in color or odor of their vaginal discharge. Other women do not notice any change in discharge.

### **Treatment.**

Yeast infections can be treated either by placing medication into the vagina or by taking a pill. In most cases, treatment of male sex partners is not necessary.

Some women treat themselves with a yeast infection medication without a physician's prescription when they have symptoms of vaginitis. These treatments are safe and often effective. But many women think that they have a yeast infection when they actually have another problem. In these cases, a medication for a yeast infection will not work. It also may cause a delay in proper diagnosis and treatment of the actual problem. That is why it is preferred to consult a health care provider whenever a woman feels such symptoms.

### **See your health care provider in case:**

- This is the first time you have vaginal symptoms.
- You have had a yeast infection before (prior to using an over-the-counter medication to treat your symptoms.)
- If you have used an over-the-counter medication and your symptoms do not go away.

### *Bacterial Vaginosis*

#### **Cause.**

Bacterial vaginosis is caused by an imbalance in the types of normal bacteria that live in the vagina.

#### **Symptoms.**

The main symptom is increased discharge with a strong strange odor. The odor may be stronger during your menstrual period or after sex. The discharge usually is thin and dark or dull gray, but may have a greenish color. Itching is not common but may be present if there is a lot of discharge.

#### **Treatment.**

Several different antibiotics can be used to treat bacterial vaginosis. Some examples of antibiotics are metronidazole and clindamycin. They can be taken by mouth or inserted into the vagina as a cream or gel. Sexual partners do not need to be treated.

When metronidazole is taken by mouth, it can cause side effects in some patients. These include nausea, vomiting, and darkening of urine. Do not drink alcohol when taking metronidazole. The combination can cause severe nausea and vomiting.

Bacterial vaginosis often reappears. It may require repeated treatment. In some cases, longer treatment for 3 to 6 months may be needed.

### *Trichomoniasis*

#### **Cause.**

Trichomoniasis is a condition caused by the microscopic parasite *Trichomonas vaginalis*. It is an STD (sexually transmitted disease: a disease that is transferred from sexual contact). Women who have trichomoniasis are more at risk of getting STDs.

#### **Symptoms.**

Signs of trichomoniasis may include a yellow-gray or green vaginal discharge. The discharge may have a strange odor. There may be burning, irritation, redness, and swelling of the vulva. Sometimes there is pain during urination.

#### **Treatment.**

Trichomoniasis usually is treated with metronidazole by mouth, either a single dose or a dosage taken over 7 days. A single dose of another drug, called tinidazole, also can be used. Sexual partners must be treated to prevent the infection from recurring. You should not have sexual intercourse until you and your partner have received treatment.

### *Atrophic Vaginitis*

#### **Cause.**

This condition is not caused by an infection but can cause a discharge and vaginal irritation. It may occur any time when female hormone levels are low, such as during breastfeeding and after menopause.

#### **Symptoms.**

Symptoms include dryness, itching, and burning. Other symptoms include abnormal vaginal discharge and pain during sexual intercourse.

#### **Treatment.**

Atrophic vaginitis is treated with estrogen (a female hormone) that is applied inside the vagina. It is available as a cream, tablet, or ring. Using a lubricant also may be helpful to avoid pain during intercourse.

## Finally...

If you think you have symptoms of vaginitis, such as burning or itching, contact your health care provider. Although vaginitis can cause discomfort, it almost always can be treated once the cause has been found.

*With the compliments of the Lebanese Society of Obstetrics and Gynecology*

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