

Self-care information on...

Vaginal thrush



What is vaginal thrush?

Vaginal thrush is a fungal yeast infection. It is usually caused by a yeast like fungus that lives naturally in the vagina. This does not usually cause any symptoms, however when the natural balance of the vagina is upset this fungus can multiply and cause symptoms.

The fungi that cause thrush like warm, moist, airless parts of the body. This is why the vagina is the most common site for infection. Other areas of the body that are prone to this type of infection include the groin, the mouth, and the nappy area in babies.

Thrush does not damage the vagina, and it does not spread to damage the uterus (womb). If you are pregnant, thrush will not harm your baby.

What increases your chances of developing thrush?

- Recent course of antibiotics
- Pregnancy
- Having diabetes
- A weakened immune system.

What are the symptoms of vaginal thrush?

- Itching and soreness around the entrance of the vagina
- Pain during sex
- A stinging sensation when you urinate
- Vaginal discharge, although this is not always present; the discharge is usually odourless and it can be thin and watery or thick and white like cottage cheese.

How do you treat vaginal thrush?

Tablets, creams and pessaries to treat vaginal thrush are available from your pharmacist without a prescription. Pessaries and oral treatments have been found to be equally effective in treating thrush. These treatments can be useful for treating thrush if you have had it before and it has returned. However, if this is the first time you have had thrush, you should visit your GP practice to confirm the diagnosis rather than treat it yourself.

Thrush treatments bought from a pharmacy should not be used long term without first consulting your GP.

Anti-thrush pessaries

- Treat fungus in the vagina.
- A pessary is a specially shaped medication that you insert into your vagina using an applicator, in a similar way to how a tampon is inserted.
- There are several strengths of pessary available – always read the packaging before use.
- Examples include: Clotrimazole pessary (brands include Canesten®).

Anti-thrush cream

- Treats fungus on the skin around the entrance to the vagina.
- Examples include: Clotrimazole 1% cream (brands include Canesten®).

Anti-thrush oral tablets

- Treat fungus in the vagina and the surrounding area.
- Can cause side effects including nausea; vomiting; headache and diarrhoea.
- Examples include: Fluconazole 150mg tablets (brands include Diflucan®).
- Do not take if you are pregnant or breast feeding

Important: some pessaries and creams may damage latex condoms and diaphragms and affect their use as a contraceptive.

Other things that may help

If you have thrush, you may also find the following things help to relieve your symptoms:

- Avoid wearing tight-fitting clothing, especially clothing made from synthetic materials. Loose-fitting, cotton underwear may be better.
- Avoid using perfumed products around the vaginal area, such as soaps and shower gels, as these may cause further irritation.

Male thrush

In rare cases, male partners of women who have thrush can develop a condition called candidal balanitis. Symptoms include redness, itch and soreness of the foreskin and the head (glans) of the penis.

Male sexual partners do not need treatment unless they have symptoms of thrush on their penis.

Thrush affecting the penis can be treated using an anti-thrush tablet available to buy from pharmacies. An anti-thrush cream can be bought for thrush infections in the groin.

When to contact your GP practice

- If this is the first time that you have had thrush
- You are under 16 years of age or over 60
- You are pregnant or may be pregnant
- You are breastfeeding
- You have abnormal menstrual bleeding or a blood-stained discharge
- You have lower abdominal pain
- You have a red and swollen vagina and vulva or cracked skin around the entrance of your vagina
- Your symptoms are different from previous bouts of thrush – for example, if the discharge is a different colour or has a bad smell
- You have sores in the surrounding area – this is rare, but it may indicate the presence of another condition or the herpes simplex virus (the virus that causes genital herpes).
- You have had two cases of thrush within the last six months
- You or your partner have previously had a sexually transmitted infection (STI)
- You have reacted badly to an antifungal treatment in the past, or it did not work
- Your symptoms do not improve after 7-14 days.

If you need any further information:

- Ask your pharmacist
- NHS choices: www.nhs.uk
- Patient UK www.patient.co.uk

