



Vaginas--What's Normal? And How Do You Keep It That Way?

A healthy vagina is full of friendly normal bacteria, predominantly *Lactobacillus acidophilus*. These good bacteria protect the vagina and keep it healthy. One of their jobs is to control the population of unfriendly microbes such as yeast and 'bad' bacteria. The pH (or acid-alkaline balance) in the vagina needs to be mildly acidic and normally varies slightly during the monthly fertility cycle. If your healthy bacteria die off then unfriendly bacteria or yeast are free to take over. Taking antibiotics can cause a die-off of your normal flora. Exposure to chemicals and cleaning products can also shift the balance and cause a die off of the supportive bacteria. Sometimes it just seems to happen for no reason, but other factors such as high stress, poor diet, misguided 'hygiene' practices or other factors that can shift that vaginal environment are at work.

It is normal to have vaginal discharge, indeed it is an essential component of the vagina's ability to keep itself clean. Normal discharge does not itch, burn or feel irritating. It smells faintly with a pleasant, slightly musky odor. The smell and taste of your vaginal discharge is normally mild. A healthy vagina does not smell bad. It doesn't smell like fish or have a strong foul odor. It varies in color, consistency and amount depending on where in the fertility cycle a woman is at, if she is on hormonal birth control or is post-menopausal. The color varies from white to clear. The amount varies from scant to moderate. Some women are normally drier, while some tend to be wetter. It is important to know what amount is normal for you.

Signs of infection include increased amount of discharge, above what levels are normal for you, as well as any change in color, consistency, discomfort or bad smells.

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) and Yeast (*candida* or *monilia*) vaginal infections are commonly associated with excessive hygiene. That includes the use of douche, vaginal deodorants, sprays, wipes, washes, powders, anti-bacterial soaps, deodorant soaps, body washes, bubble baths, and all of those so-called vaginal hygiene products. Spermicide can also be problematic for many women. Your healthy vagina doesn't smell bad and doesn't need chemical crap to irritate it. The misguided practice of vaginal douching and use of those other products is a common cause of BV infection. Douching is not a practice that is recommended for a healthy vagina and is not needed for cleanliness. Indeed, the use of any of the so-called 'Feminine Hygiene Products' (even occasionally) is one of the leading causes of imbalance in the vagina and is a main culprit in creating BV and other vaginal infections.

Clean the external parts only with clear, clean water. Use your fingers to help rinse the crevices. A hand-held shower is excellent for crotch cleaning and also is useful for self-pleasuring. There is no need to clean the inside of the vagina at all, remember, it's a self-cleaning system. A mild soap can be used on the area around the external lips but should be avoided on the internal lips and around the vaginal opening.

Imbalances and Infections

Symptoms of Bacterial Vaginosis can be either subtle or not. BV infection can manifest as an increased amount of milky white vaginal discharge with a fishy odor that also tastes bitter and no other symptoms. The smell is stronger when the bacteria are in contact with any fluid that is alkaline so an increase in that odor after intercourse involving ejaculation in the vagina is common since semen is alkaline. The same increase in odor will occur at the end of menses due to the presence of alkaline blood. You may or may not notice an increase in vaginal discharge that is gray or white, thin, milky or frothy. Some women have mild itching and irritation. Occasionally there is pelvic or lower abdominal pain.

Yeast are normal inhabitants of our bodies, but are usually kept down to a small population by a variety of control mechanisms. Certain characteristics and situations allow the yeast to overgrow and cause the classic symptoms of a vaginal yeast infection. Symptoms may include itching, swelling, irritation, redness and a discharge that may be scant or profuse, white, thick, curd-like or creamy and may smell yeasty.

Sexually transmitted infections or diseases (STI or STD) can also cause changes in vaginal discharge. It is common for there to be little or no symptoms with STI's, so if there is any chance of exposure, that is, sexual contact without barriers, it is advisable to see a practitioner for testing and evaluation.

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