

## Fact sheet

# Vaginal discharge

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Vaginal discharge is fluid that comes from the vagina. It is normal for women to have some vaginal discharge. This fluid has important functions like protecting you from infections and making sex more comfortable.

### What is normal vaginal discharge?

Normal vaginal discharge is usually clear or white. However, the stain normal discharge leaves on underwear is often slightly yellow. The discharge can be liquid or a bit stretchy and slippery like egg white. Normal vaginal discharge does not smell bad.

You will notice that your discharge changes at different times during your menstrual cycle.

Using 'the pill' (contraceptive pill) or being pregnant may also change your vaginal discharge.

Most women who are past menopause have less vaginal discharge because of the lower levels of female hormones. However, occasionally there can be an increase in discharge if irritation occurs.

### When should I be worried about vaginal discharge?

If you notice a sudden change in your vaginal discharge you should discuss this with your doctor. Particular things to look out for include if the discharge

- has blood in it, or is pink or brown in colour
- is green
- smells bad
- is thick, white and itchy.



Also if you notice any of the following symptoms with the discharge

- sores or blisters around the vaginal area
- itching or soreness of the vagina
- pain in the lower abdomen (stomach) or pain during sex
- pain when passing urine
- fever or high temperatures.

### What might cause an abnormal discharge?

- Something irritating the vagina (vaginitis) is a common reason for increased vaginal discharge. It can be caused by some soaps, body washes or bubble baths, or by products like lubricants for sex or vaginal deodorants / douches. Occasionally, it can occur if tampons are left in for too long.
- Infections can cause discharge:
  - Some infections are sexually transmitted (STIs). Sexually transmitted causes of vaginal discharge include chlamydia, gonorrhoea, herpes and trichomonas.
  - Other infections are not sexually transmitted and occur for other reasons. These include thrush (candida) and bacterial vaginosis (gardnerella).
- Menopause – because the female hormone (estrogen) is low after menopause the vagina can be dry. This may causes irritation with itching and discharge. These symptoms can be treated with estrogen (hormone) as a cream or small tablets which you place in the vagina.
- Rarely vaginal discharge that has blood in it can be caused by cancers of the vagina, cervix or uterus.

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### What should I do if I think my vaginal discharge is abnormal?

We do NOT recommend that you treat vaginal discharge yourself with over the counter medications as it can make your symptoms worse. It also makes it more difficult for your doctor to find the cause of your discharge and give you the right treatment.

Visit your GP or sexual health clinic if you notice abnormal discharge. The staff will examine you and take some tests. These may include a pap smear (sample from the cervix or neck of the womb to check for cells that may become cancer) and a sample of the discharge to find out what is causing it.

If your discharge is caused by an infection, your doctor will prescribe a treatment to fix the problem. If the discharge is caused by a sexually transmitted infection your partner will need to be checked and treated as well. This is important so that the discharge does not come back again.

**We do NOT recommend that you treat vaginal discharge yourself with over the counter medications as it can make your symptoms worse.**

**Visit your GP or sexual health clinic if you notice abnormal discharge**

If no infection or other reason is found for your discharge then your symptoms are most likely caused by something that is irritating the vagina.

In this case it is a good idea to avoid the following:

- perfumed soaps
- vaginal deodorant sprays or lubricants
- vaginal douching – some women 'wash out' the vagina with water or liquid, this can make vaginal discharge worse and cause itching
- scented/perfumed toilet paper or baby wipes
- using panty liners every day
- bubble baths
- using strong soap or fabric softeners to wash your underwear.

It is best to wash around the vagina with warm water only without using soap or face washers.

Vaginal discharge, itching and soreness can be distressing and it may take some time for the problems to settle. However, if you avoid the things on this list, your symptoms will usually go away. If they don't, see your doctor again.

**We welcome further feedback on this brochure as a way of continually improving our service.**

**Send your feedback to:**

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