

## **Patient Education for Yeast Infections**

### **What is yeast?**

Yeast infections are a very common vaginal infection. They fall under the category of something called vaginitis. Typically vaginitis is characterized by a discharge and frequently burning, itching or irritation. While there are several different causes of vaginitis, yeast infections are one of the more common varieties. Yeast is actually a fungal infection caused by a Candida species of yeast.

### **How common is yeast vaginitis?**

This is a very common complaint for women. There are about ten million office visits every year for vaginitis. About one third of all vaginitis cases are caused by yeast infections. Vaginitis is one of the most common reasons women go to their doctor and up to seventy-five percent of women may have an episode at some point in their lifetime.

### **How does this happen?**

Yeast organisms may be part of the normal vaginal environment. In studies yeast has been identified in women who have absolutely no symptoms. It may be that something tilts the balance of the vagina and favors an increase in the amount of yeast growing there. There are certain things that predispose to a yeast infection. Women who are pregnant, have recently used antibiotics, or perhaps use hormones may have an increased chance of developing a yeast infection. Other women who are at risk include women with diabetes and those who have medical conditions or take medicines which weaken the immune system. This would include cancer treatment, transplant patients and women with HIV.

### **How do you diagnose a yeast infection?**

The description of the symptoms provide a large clue. This usually includes itching and burning in the vaginal area. This might be accompanied by a thick white discharge and reddened skin around the vagina. Also other predisposing factors such as recent antibiotic use or steroid medications may increase suspicion. An examination of the vagina may be necessary. Your health care provider will perform a speculum exam to see inside the vagina as well as look at the area outside the vagina. They may take some samples of the secretions using a cotton swab. They can use these samples to look under the microscope and measure the pH of the vagina. All of these things will help determine if the symptoms are caused by yeast or some other organisms. Frequently, but not always, one can actually see the yeast organisms under the microscope. If this happens the diagnosis is confirmed. Occasionally special cultures can be obtained to see if yeast will grow in the laboratory. However, this is generally reserved for women who have been treated several times and for several different cause of vaginitis without success.

## **How do you treat yeast vaginitis?**

There are many over the counter medications which can be used without a prescription. These are applied directly to the vagina or the area surrounding the opening of the vagina. They come as a cream, which can be inserted using a special applicator, or as suppositories, which are tablets that can be put inside the vagina. However caution should be used if patients decide to treat themselves. Self medication for yeast should probably be reserved for those individuals with similar symptoms to a previously diagnosed yeast infection successfully treated in the past. If a woman has not improved after treatment or has repeated bouts of vaginitis she should seek medical help. In these cases your health care provider can verify the cause of vaginitis and determine the appropriate treatment. There are also some pills that you take by mouth for yeast, which the health care provider may prescribe. If all of these medicines fail there are other things that can be used but these are less common and also require the advice of a health care provider. If you are pregnant be sure to consult with a doctor to make sure these remedies are safe. *Candida albicans* is the most common type of yeast species and the easiest to treat. However there are other types of yeast that are harder to identify and cure.

## **Frequently Asked Questions:**

### **Is this sexually transmitted? Did I get this from my partner or can I give it to my partner?**

The likely answer is no. However men can also have a yeast infection and some practitioners have treated sexual partners of women who have recurrent infections.

### **If I have this and I am pregnant, is it bad for the baby?**

No. Yeast infections are common in pregnant women and most treatments are safe during pregnancy.

### **Should I be tested for other diseases like HIV or diabetes if I have a yeast infection?**

If there is no other suspicious history for having these conditions the likelihood is that you do not require testing.