

Patient education: Vaginal discharge in women (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is vaginal discharge?

"Vaginal discharge" is the term doctors use to describe the fluid that comes out of the vagina . Vaginal discharge is made up of cells from the vagina and cervix, bacteria, mucus, and water.

Can vaginal discharge be normal?

Yes. Normally, women who get monthly periods can have a small amount of vaginal discharge each day. Normal vaginal discharge can be white, clear, or thick, but usually does not smell bad.

Different women can have different amounts of vaginal discharge. Also, a woman can have more or less vaginal discharge at different times. For example, a woman might notice more vaginal discharge:

- When she is pregnant
- When she uses hormone birth control medicines
- During the 2 weeks before she gets her period

Women who have been through menopause usually have less vaginal discharge. Menopause is the time when a woman stops getting her monthly period.

When is vaginal discharge abnormal?

Vaginal discharge is abnormal when it occurs with the following symptoms:

- Itching of the vagina or the area around the vagina
- Redness, pain, or swelling around the vagina
- Discharge that is foamy, greenish-yellow, or has blood in it
- Discharge that smells bad
- Pain when urinating or having sex
- Pain in the lower part of the belly
- Fever

What are the causes of abnormal vaginal discharge?

Different conditions can cause abnormal vaginal discharge. The most common causes are:

- An infection in the vagina, cervix, or uterus
- A reaction to something in the vagina that a woman forgot to take out, such as a tampon or condom
- A reaction to a soap or other product that was in the vagina
- Changes in the body that occur after menopause

Should I treat abnormal vaginal discharge myself?

No. Most doctors recommend that you do not treat abnormal vaginal discharge yourself. Treating yourself can cause your symptoms to get worse.

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

Yes. If you have abnormal vaginal discharge, see a doctor or nurse so that he or she can figure out the cause. Your doctor or nurse will talk with you and do an exam. He or she will also take a sample of your vaginal discharge, and do lab tests on the sample to look for an infection.

How is abnormal vaginal discharge treated?

Treatment will depend on the cause of the abnormal vaginal discharge. For example, different vaginal infections are treated with different medicines. If you have a vaginal infection, your doctor or nurse will want to figure out what type of infection you have so that he or she can treat it with the right medicine.

If your abnormal vaginal discharge is caused by certain types of infections, your sex partner will also need to see a doctor for treatment. (You might want to stop having sex until you know what is causing your symptoms.)

Can abnormal vaginal discharge be prevented?

Sometimes. You can help prevent abnormal vaginal discharge by:

- Using warm water and unscented non-soap cleanser to wash your vulva (the vulva is the area of skin around the outside of the vagina)
- Taking baths in plain warm water, and not using scented bath products
- Not using sprays or powders on your vagina
- Not douching (douching is when a woman puts a liquid inside her vagina to rinse it out)
- Not wiping with baby wipes or scented toilet paper after you use the toilet