

# Personal Health for Young Women

## Vaginal discharge: what is normal?

It is normal for every woman to have vaginal discharge. The vagina actually cleans itself. Its walls contain many tiny glands that continuously produce a cleansing and lubricating film of moisture.

Vaginal discharge is clear or slightly milky in color and may be somewhat slippery, especially at the time of ovulation, when your body releases an egg. When it dries on clothing it is yellowish in color. It normally causes no irritation, redness, or odor.

Although every woman has some vaginal discharge, women vary in the amount and consistency of discharge they produce. In addition, the discharge is different depending on the time of her menstrual cycle or her emotional feelings. When a woman is sexually aroused, the secretions also increase.

## Vaginal infections

Many bacteria grow in the vagina of a normal, healthy woman. Some of them help to keep the vagina in balance so that yeast and other germs do not grow to harmful amounts. If they do, then an infection may develop. Some of the reasons women get infections include lack of sleep, poor diet (including too much sugar), other infections in the body, douching, chemical irritations, pregnancy, taking antibiotics, or having diabetes.

Three common vaginal infections include yeast, Bacterial Vaginosis (BV), and Trichomonas Vaginalis (Trich). Symptoms of an infection can include odor, change in color or consistency of the discharge, swelling, itching, burning and pain when going to the bathroom or having sex. Vaginal infections also can be passed from partner to partner while having sex.

## Keep the lining of the vagina healthy

- Do not douche or insert any kind of cleaning products into the vagina. This can wash away the “good” bacteria, making it easier for harmful germs to grow into an infection.
- Keep dry. Yeast grows quickly in warm moist areas, the following suggestions may help:
  - Avoid tight fitting pants or jeans because they keep the vaginal area moist.
  - Do not wear wet bathing suits or wet/damp workout clothes for longer than necessary.
  - Wear underpants with a cotton crotch which allows the skin in that area to breathe.
- Do not use feminine hygiene sprays, deodorant pads or tampons which can irritate the skin, making it easier for germs to grow.

## Keep harmful germs out of the vagina

- Wipe from front to back after using the toilet so that bacteria are not carried from the rectum to the urinary or vaginal opening.
- Wash hands before and after inserting a tampon.
- Only use tampons that are wrapped. If the wrapper has come loose, the tampon may have germs on it.
- During a tub bath, avoid perfumed oils or bubble bath since they help bacteria travel up the vagina and the urinary tract.

# Take care of yourself!

## Know your body

Only you know what is a “normal” discharge for your body. If your discharge changes in color, odor, or type, it is important to have a check-up right away. Remember, bacteria and yeast occur naturally in the vagina, so you can develop one of these infections even if you have never been sexually active.

Do not be embarrassed to take care of your personal health. Talk to someone who can help you get the care you need. **Learning to feel comfortable with your body and taking care of your sexual health are important for a sense of wellbeing.**

## Female pelvic exams: the when, why, and how

A pelvic exam is not routinely recommended in patients less than 21 years unless as indicated by an individual patient’s history.

As part of the pelvic exam, the speculum is used to open the vagina. When the speculum is inserted, the provider will take a look to see if the cervix is pink and smooth. The provider will remove some cells from the cervix with a small brush, and send to a lab to check for cell changes. This is called a Pap smear.

The cells in the cervix will be tested for cell changes, as cell changes over time could develop into cervical cancer. Pap smears are important because if cervical cancer is caught early, there is a high cure rate. Consult with your provider to discuss how often a Pap smear is recommended for you. If STI testing is required or requested, it will also be done when the speculum is inside the vagina.

When the exam is finished, the speculum is removed. The provider will then insert two gloved fingers into the vagina and push on the cervix. With his/her other hand, the provider will push on the abdomen to feel the uterus and ovaries making sure they feel smooth, no mass, are correct sizes, and that there are no painful areas.

The vagina is a muscle, so being nervous and tense might make a pelvic exam uncomfortable when the speculum is inserted. Taking a few deep breaths and relaxation helps.

If you are a young woman who has never had a pelvic exam or who has had a harmful or abusive sexual experience, you may feel uncomfortable about your body and having a pelvic exam.

Tips to help you overcome your fear:

- Consider taking a support person with you to the exam.
- Request a female provider if you would feel more comfortable.
- Ask the provider to explain each step of the exam to you.
- Get counseling to heal from your hurtful sexual experience.

## Need an appointment? Call our Patient Access Center: (847) 377-8800

Belvidere Medical Building\*, 2400 Belvidere Rd, Waukegan, IL

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Libertyville Health Center, 18698 West Peterson Rd, Libertyville, IL 60048

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Round Lake Area Student Health and Wellness Center\* (located inside Round Lake High School)

800 North High School Dr, Round Lake, IL - Appointments: (847) 257-1200

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