

VAGINAL THRUSH/CANDIDIASIS

What is Vaginal Thrush

Vaginal thrush is a common infection caused by yeast called *Candida Albicans*. Another name for vaginal thrush is candidiasis. Over one half of Australian women will have vaginal thrush at least once in their lifetime. This yeast is normally present in the mouth, gut and vagina, as are a number of other organisms. If the balance of microorganisms is disrupted, as can occur with taking broad spectrum antibiotics, hormonal fluctuations, and other conditions, an over growth of yeast can occur. Vaginal candidiasis, often referred to as “yeast infection or thrush” is a common problem affecting nearly 75% of adult women in their lifetime.

Symptoms of Vaginal Thrush

These are the symptoms associated with vaginal thrush:

- Genital itch – this is the most common symptom of thrush, especially if worse before your period.
- Soreness or burning of the vagina during or after sex.
- Abnormal discharge – usually thick and white.
- Change in the smell of your vaginal secretions
- Redness and inflammation of the vulva
- Soreness or discomfort on urination
- Pain – particularly if thrush is recurrent
- Small white spots on the vaginal wall.

Diagnosis of Vaginal Thrush

A diagnosis of vaginal thrush is often made based on your symptoms. However, there are many other conditions of the vagina and vulva that have symptoms similar to thrush. If there is a doubt about the diagnosis, your doctor will take a vaginal swab and send it for analysis.

How did I get Vaginal Thrush

The yeast that causes thrush, *Candida albicans*, enters the body via the food you eat. It can live in the bowel without causing any problems. It is spread to the vagina from the anus via the perineum –the area between the anus and the vagina. This is known as perineal spread. Other species of yeast often colonise the vagina but cause no harm. Only *Candida albicans* causes symptoms of vaginal thrush.

Women are prone to vaginal thrush between puberty and menopause because, under the influence of the hormone oestrogen, the cells lining the vagina produce sugar. Yeasts (which is what *Candida albicans* is) are attracted to sugars. That is why thrush is rare before puberty, in breast feeding women (who are oestrogen deficient), and after menopause unless a woman is on hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or has diabetes.

How to Avoid Getting Thrush

Numerous lifestyle changes have been suggested to prevent thrush. These include avoiding sugar and other dietary measures, avoidance of tight clothing, and alteration of sexual practices. None of these have been proven to be effective. *Candida albicans* is not sexually transmitted.

Antibiotics promote the growth of yeasts, so are best avoided unless really necessary.

Contrary to popular belief, the oral contraceptive pill makes no significant difference to a woman's chances of getting thrush. The long acting progesterone contraceptives, Depo-Provera (injection) and Implanon (implant), lower the incidence of thrush, because they suppress ovarian production of oestrogen and contain no oestrogen themselves. Breast feeding has the same effect which is why thrush is seldom a problem in breast feeding women.

What if Thrush Keeps Coming Back

A minority of women will get thrush a couple of times a year or more. This is called recurrent candidiasis and is best proactively managed.

Treatment of Vaginal Thrush

Treatment with a cream from the anti-candidal group of medicines called azoles, inserted into the vagina every night, is the most effective means of eradicating the yeast from the vagina. These azole creams usually come with an applicator and include miconazole (eg. Resolve Thrush) and clotrimazole (eg. Canesten). Even if your period starts you can still use these creams. The creams are available from pharmacies and can be used to treat an isolated episode of thrush (that is one that occurs more than a year since the previous episode).

Vaginal thrush may also be treated with anti-thrush tablets that you take by mouth. Examples of anti-thrush tablets are: Canesoral and Diflucan – these are both brands of medicine called fluconazole. These are not to be taken by pregnant women.