Recurrent discharge –Leaflet for patients

Causes of unusual vaginal discharge

Abnormal vaginal discharge is usually a sign of an infection.

The most common causes are:

* [bacterial vaginosis (BV)](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/bacterialvaginosis/Pages/Introduction.aspx) – a bacterial infection of the vagina
* [thrush](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/thrush/Pages/Introduction.aspx) – an infection caused by overgrowth of yeast found in the vagina
* [trichomoniasis](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Trichomonas_vaginalis/Pages/Introduction.aspx) – a [sexually transmitted infection (STI)](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Sexually-transmitted-infections/Pages/Introduction.aspx) caused by a parasite
* [gonorrhoea](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Gonorrhoea/Pages/Introduction.aspx) or [chlamydia](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/chlamydia/Pages/Introduction.aspx) – STIs caused by bacteria
* [genital herpes](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/genital-herpes/Pages/Introduction.aspx) – an STI caused by a virus

You can also get unusual vaginal discharge from a condom or [tampon stuck in your vagina](http://www.nhs.uk/chq/Pages/983.aspx) or from [cleaning inside your vagina (douching)](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/vagina-health/Pages/keep-vagina-clean.aspx).

It's hard to tell what the cause is just based on the type of discharge you have. The guide below may help give you some idea, but always see a doctor or nurse for a proper diagnosis and advice.

White or grey fishy-smelling discharge

If your discharge is white or grey, thin and watery, and has an unpleasant fishy smell, you may have [bacterial vaginosis (BV)](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/bacterialvaginosis/Pages/Introduction.aspx).

This is an imbalance in the normal bacteria found in your vagina. It doesn't usually cause other symptoms, such as itching or irritation.

BV is very common and isn't considered an STI, but sex may play a part in triggering it. It's easily treated with [antibiotics](http://www.nhs.uk/medicine-guides/pages/MedicineOverview.aspx?condition=Bacterial%20infections&medicine=metronidazole&preparation=Metronidazole%201g%20suppositories) from your GP, although it's not uncommon for it to come back after treatment.

Thick white discharge with itchiness

If your discharge is thick and white like cottage cheese, not smelly and occurs with itchiness and soreness around your vagina, you may have [thrush](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/thrush/Pages/Introduction.aspx).

Many women get thrush from time to time. It's not sexually transmitted, although male sexual partners of women with thrush can sometimes get an itchy, sore penis.

It's treated with [antifungal medicine](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Antifungal-drugs/Pages/Introduction.aspx), which is available over the counter from a [local pharmacist](http://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Pharmacy/LocationSearch/10).

Green, yellow or frothy discharge

If your discharge becomes frothy, yellow or green and foul-smelling, you may have [trichomoniasis](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Trichomonas_vaginalis/Pages/Introduction.aspx) – though this is much rarer than the two causes of discharge mentioned above.

Other possible symptoms are soreness and itching around the vagina, pain when peeing, and pain during sex.

It's treated with antibiotics available on prescription.

Abnormal discharge with pain or bleeding

If you have unusual discharge as well as pelvic pain, pain when peeing, or bleeding between periods or after sex, you may have [chlamydia](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/chlamydia/Pages/Introduction.aspx) or [gonorrhoea](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/gonorrhoea/Pages/Introduction.aspx).

These are both treated with antibiotics available on prescription.

If untreated, they could lead to [pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/pelvic-inflammatory-disease/Pages/Introduction.aspx), a serious infection of the womb, fallopian tubes or ovaries.

Abnormal discharge with blisters

Unusual discharge occurring with painful red blisters or sores around your genitals may be a sign of [genital herpes](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Genital-herpes/Pages/Introduction.aspx).

It's treated with antiviral tablets available on prescription.

The symptoms can come back and you may need advice from your doctor about treatment to keep it under control.

Young girls and postmenopausal women

It's unusual for young girls to have abnormal vaginal discharge before they've started [puberty](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/puberty/Pages/puberty-signs.aspx). See a GP if this happens.

The causes mentioned above are uncommon in young girls, but discharge could be the result of inflammation of the vulva (vulvitis) caused by [streptococcal bacteria](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/streptococcal-infections/Pages/Introduction.aspx).

Abnormal discharge is also unusual in older women. See your GP if you've gone through the menopause and experience abnormal vaginal discharge or [vaginal bleeding](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/postmenopausal-bleeding-or-spotting/Pages/Introduction.aspx).

It might be related to the causes mentioned above, but your doctor may want to rule out other problems, such as growths in the womb or lining of the cervix (cervical polyps) or possibly [womb cancer](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Cancer-of-the-uterus/Pages/Introduction.aspx).

It's important to pick up womb cancer as early as possible, so don't ignore the symptoms – especially vaginal bleeding