



A guide to
**Vaginal
discharge**

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What is vaginal discharge?

It is common and often normal to have vaginal discharge. This is called “physiological discharge”. Physiological discharge contains cleansing bacteria (called lactobacilli) which help to prevent some infections.

An abnormal vaginal discharge can also be caused by infections, some of which may or may not be associated with sex.

What are the possible causes of vaginal discharge?

The most common causes of an abnormal vaginal discharge are thrush (candidiasis) and bacterial vaginosis (BV). These are not sexually transmitted infections.

There are a number of other possible causes of abnormal vaginal discharge:

- Sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea, *Trichomonas vaginalis* and genital herpes
- Non-infectious causes: cervical ectropion and cervical polyps, malignancy, a foreign body (example: a retained tampon or condom), dermatitis and an allergic reaction.

What symptoms do the different causes of vaginal discharge lead to?

A normal, “physiological discharge” is usually white or clear, not smelly, and can vary with your menstrual cycle.

This is not the same as bacterial vaginosis (see bacterial vaginosis leaflet), which typically has a discharge that is grey, pale and thin. It can have a ‘fishy’ smell which can be worse after sex.

Thrush typically has a white, thick discharge and often causes itch and irritation in the vulva and vagina. This doesn’t have a smell. See thrush leaflet.

Discharge caused by sexually transmitted infections can vary in the amount, light to heavy and colour, white, yellow or green.

How can I be tested?

Your healthcare provider will ask you some questions, examine you and do some tests to find out what is causing the abnormal discharge.

If you are sexually active, you should test for sexually transmitted infections.

How is abnormal vaginal discharge treated?

Treatment will depend on the cause of the vaginal discharge. This can range from a cream or pessaries (vaginal tablets), to a course of antibiotics. Your healthcare provider will explain the treatment to you.

Sometimes no treatment is needed because the discharge is normal.

For further information, see leaflets on Thrush and BV.