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*Priscelia Chan*

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# Take Charge of Vaginal Discharge

As if having menstrual cramps is not bad enough, there's also fishy odour and vulva itching to contend with. How can you tell if your vaginal discharge is normal or a sign of infection?

**All** women of childbearing age produce vaginal discharge that may look clear or white, and have a watery to slightly sticky consistency, depending on the time in your menstrual cycle.

The discharge helps keep your vagina clean, lubricated and free from germs and infections. Yet when it feels and looks anything but, it's definitely a cause of concern.

Dr Goh Shen Li, Senior Consultant Obstetrician & Gynaecologist of SL Goh Women's Clinic at Mount Alvernia Hospital, gives some insights into what the changes in your discharge could signal, so you know when it is time to see a doctor.

## **LiveWell: Some women have more discharge than others - is that normal?**

**Dr Goh Shen Li:** The amount of vaginal discharge varies between women and having more discharge does not automatically equate to having an infection. The amount of discharge also changes during the various periods of the menstrual calendar, such as the premenstrual phase, which is due to hormonal changes.

## **How do I know whether I'm having a yeast infection, bacterial vaginosis or non-infectious vaginitis?**

Yeast infections or candidiasis cause a thick, whitish-grey curd-like "cottage cheese" type of vaginal discharge and may be itchy. The itch can be intense in the genital area and the discharge can appear in small clumps. It may be associated with painful urination and sexual intercourse. The amount of vaginal discharge in yeast infections can be variable and most male partners of women with yeast infections do not experience any symptoms of the infection.

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) causes an abnormal vaginal discharge with a strong, unpleasant odour. Some women

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report a strong fishy smell, especially after sexual intercourse. The discharge is usually white or grey and it can look watery and thin. You may also have a burning sensation during urination or itching around the outside of the vagina, or both. However, some women with BV have no symptoms at all.

Non-infectious vaginitis includes other causes of vaginal inflammation such as:

- Allergies to spermicides/ vaginal hygiene products/ detergents and fabric softeners.
- Atrophic vaginitis in older women (thinning of the vaginal walls during menopause).
- Foreign objects such as a forgotten tampon causing vaginal irritation.

**Vaginal yeast infections can sometimes be mistaken as genital herpes. How do I tell the difference?**

Vaginal yeast infections are usually itchy and associated with clumpy discharge. The skin on the vulva is diffusely red and raw, with occasional small areas of skin fissures or abrasions.

Genital herpes are characterised more by pain than intense itching, and is associated with multiple small ulcers on the skin. It can start as small red bumps or blisters, which form the painful tender ulcers when the blisters rupture.

**Will wearing panty liners increase my risk of getting a yeast infection?**

It has not been shown that wearing panty liners increase the risk of a yeast infection. Wearing scented panty liners or using scented soap for the genital area may irritate the area, leading to some itch and discomfort.

**How often should I change my panty liner?**

You should change your panty liner as often as you

feel comfortable. There is no minimum or maximum frequency of change.

**Does growing the pubic hair increase the risk of thrush?**

Thrush can occur regardless of the amount of pubic hair and is more likely with antibiotic or steroid use, diabetes, lowered immunity states, hormonal changes such as pregnancy or menopause, as well as wearing of tight non-cotton underwear.

**Is there a link between pubic hair and itching, or it's highly likely an infection?**

There is no link between the amount of pubic hair and itching. An itch does not necessarily mean an infection, and could just simply be chafing of the skin or dryness of the skin.

**So is it more hygienic to remove all my pubic hair or will that cause more chafing?**

It all depends on personal preference, as some women find it easier to maintain hygiene after pubic hair removal. However, some women find regrowth problematic as folliculitis (infection of the hair follicles) can occur.

**Why are there small bumps on my vagina if I don't wax?**

The small bumps on the vulva are due to infected hair follicles (folliculitis) and signify a blocked hair gland, causing the bumps and infection. This can occur even without previous hair removal or waxing.

**What should I do if I find a pimple growing "down there"?**

If the pimple is small, you can try keeping the area clean and dry by washing the area well and drying it completely, changing underwear regularly, and applying a topical antibiotic cream. If the bump gets larger despite these measures or if you develop a fever, oral antibiotics may be indicated or you may require an incision and drainage of pus under anaesthesia. **LW**



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