

Understanding thrush



Thrush is caused by an overgrowth of the yeast *Candida albicans*, that usually live in the vagina in small numbers. Both medical and lifestyle factors can increase your risk of getting thrush.

What is thrush?

Thrush is an extremely common yeast infection caused by an overgrowth of *Candida*. A yeast is a type of fungus. The infection usually appears as thick white, or cream-colored deposits on mucous membranes such as the tongue, inner cheeks, gums, tonsils and palate, vagina and anus.

In more severe cases, thrush can spread to other body parts, such as the oesophagus and lungs (systemic candidiasis).

Like most healthy people, you probably have small amounts of *Candida* in your mouth, digestive tract, your vagina and on your skin. *Candida* is one of billions of micro-organisms that share your body, making up what is known as the normal flora in your system.

Normally you are unaware of its existence and normally it does you no harm — it is only when it grows out of control that it causes problems.

It is estimated that around 75 per cent of all women will have thrush at some time in their life. Thrush is most common in women aged between 20 and 40 years and is quite common during pregnancy.

What causes thrush?

Vaginal thrush is not a sexually transmitted infection (STI). Things that may cause an increase in the amount of yeast in the vagina include:

- Using antibiotics.
- Having high oestrogen levels due to pregnancy.
- Hormone replacement therapy (HRT).
- Taking birth control pills.

- Changes in the menstrual cycle.
- Having diabetes.
- Having an immune system disorder.
- Being deficient in iron.
- Using corticosteroids.
- Being overweight.

Sometimes, however, no reason for the overgrowth can be identified.

Symptoms of thrush

Vaginal thrush has a multitude of symptoms. Some of them include:

- Severe vaginal itching.
- Soreness or burning sensation of the vagina, particularly during or after sex or while urinating.
- Vaginal discharge that is usually white, thick and clumpy (looks like cottage cheese) but is odourless.
- A change in the odour of your vaginal secretions.
- Red, irritated skin or inflammation of the vulva.
- Splits in the genital skin.

Symptoms of thrush are usually worse the week before your period.

While the above symptoms may indicate thrush, some of them may be a result of other conditions such as bacterial vaginosis (caused by an imbalance of bacteria in the vagina) or an STI.

Itching, redness and burning can also be caused by products such as soap, bath oils, spermicidal jelly or douches.

Treating thrush

Types of treatments

Thrush treatment aims to reduce the number of yeasts, so they don't cause any more symptoms. You can choose from two main OTC options:

- **Antifungal creams or vaginal pessaries (tablets)** — These are placed inside the vagina with a special applicator for a few days.
- **Oral tablets** — These are designed to be swallowed and are a more expensive way of treating thrush.

Antifungal creams and pessaries — These are usually the most effective means of treating excess yeast in the vagina. They are inserted into the vagina every night using a special applicator. Depending upon the instructions, they should be used between one and six days. Occasionally a second dose of treatment may be necessary.

Things to remember about creams and pessaries:

- You can still use these creams if you are menstruating.
- These treatments have fewer side effects than oral tablets.
- The oil in antifungal creams can weaken latex, which means condoms, or diaphragms are more likely to break. For this reason, you may need to use alternative methods of birth control.

Oral tablets — Anti-thrush tablets are an easier way to treat thrush as they are simply taken via the mouth. However, they are more expensive than creams and pessaries and are usually used for more difficult cases of thrush and often used in conjunction with vaginal treatment.

Things to remember about oral tablets:

- Oral tablets affect your whole body and therefore are more likely to have side effects such as nausea, headaches and stomach pain.
- They are not suitable for pregnant women.
- They are more expensive than creams and pessaries.

Getting the best results from your treatment

Regardless of which treatment option you use, some things will make your treatment more effective.

- Always discuss your symptoms with your pharmacist as they will be able to recommend a product that will be safe and effective for you.
- Use the product for the designated time, even if your symptoms have disappeared.

Always follow the instructions on the box and ask your pharmacist if you have any questions regarding the treatment. Some questions you may want to ask are:

- When and how should I administer the medicine?
- Can I still have sex while taking the treatment?
- Is this preparation safe to use if I am pregnant?
- Will my method of birth control be impacted by treatment?
- What should I do if I get my period? — Tampons absorb moisture so you may need to use sanitary pads instead of tampons.

Other things you should do during treatment include:

- Wear underwear that breathes (i.e. cotton) and avoid tight-fitting pants.
- Avoid the use of perfumed products (e.g. soap, sprays, douches, toilet paper).

If your symptoms persist after treatment, consult your doctor.