

So what IS vaginal thrush anyway?.....

- Thrush is one of those embarrassing and private conditions that patients find very difficult to talk about. This information leaflet will give you background information on the topic, so you are best prepared to deal with this condition.
- Vaginal thrush is an infection with a yeast (a type of fungus), most commonly *Candida albicans*. This yeast is mostly harmless, living naturally in small numbers in the bowel and vagina; however, when yeast numbers multiply rapidly, this can cause problems in many different parts of the body.
- Like most fungi, Candida likes warm, moist places to multiply and cause thrush. This is why the most common places where Candida occurs include the vagina in women, the mouth, skin creases and the nappy area.

Why do some women suffer with vaginal thrush? Are there certain things that cause the condition?

Thrush occurs when the natural balance of good and bad bacteria/fungi on your body is upset. There are many conditions/medications that may cause an upset in this balance including:

- **Broad spectrum antibiotics**
 - Antibiotics are often blamed for "causing" thrush, but this is not true. Antibiotics work by killing-off the bad bacteria in the body; however, they are not 100% selective, and sometimes our "good protective bacteria" are also killed. Without our good bacteria to protect us, the Candida are able to multiply without competition, thus causing the symptoms.
- **Poor general health and/or diet**
- **Stress or being overweight**
- **Humid weather**
- **Changes in hormonal levels** which may be exacerbated by:
 - Menstruation
 - Pregnancy
 - Using an Oral Contraceptive Pill or Hormone Replacement Therapy
- **Lowered immune system**
 - Common in patients on chemotherapy or high-dose steroids
- **Diabetes**
 - It is believed that the large amount of glucose in a diabetic patient's body contributes to their increased risk of thrush

How will I know if it is thrush?

It is important to realise that vaginal thrush is generally treated with Schedule 3 medications; that is, Pharmacist Only Medicines. This means that the pharmacist will ALWAYS be involved in the treatment of your vaginal thrush. However, it is also important for you to recognise the common signs and symptoms of the condition, so you are best able to assist the pharmacist in treating the condition quickly, easily and EFFECTIVELY. Please note that not all patients will suffer with these symptoms (e.g. patients diagnosed through routine pap smear testing); however, it is just as important in these cases to receive effective treatment from your pharmacist.

Some of the most common signs of vaginal thrush include:

- Vaginal discomfort with itching and/or burning
- Redness and/or swelling of the vagina or vulva
- Vaginal discharge which is generally thick and white with a "cottage cheese" appearance
- Discomfort with stinging/burning during urination and/or sexual intercourse

How is vaginal thrush diagnosed?

Vaginal thrush may be diagnosed a number of different ways:

- The patient may examine their genitals for the symptoms listed (see the box to the left).
- A doctor may take a swab from the affected area (often conducted during the patient's routine pap-smear test).
- There are a number of self-diagnosis kits available on the market for those who would like to check at home:
 - **Candia5:** a "do-it-yourself" finger prick blood test kit. This kit detects antibodies in our blood that react with Candida antigens. By detecting the Candida infection, this kit may prove useful in both diagnosis of the infection, but also to ensure a previous treatment has been successful.
 - **VagiTest:** another "at-home" kit, this time detecting the pH of a patient's vaginal secretions. This kit contains a pH swab, that once moistened with vaginal secretions, will show a colour that can be interpreted using the colour chart contained. If the test shows a disruption in pH (that is a pH of 4.7 and above), then a treatment to regulate vaginal pH may be required (e.g. Acijel - an acidic vaginal cream sold in our pharmacies). If the test shows a normal pH (pH 4.0-4.4), then a yeast (thrush) infection may be causing symptoms.



Treatment Options

What methods are available to treat vaginal thrush?

There are several methods of treatment available over the counter for thrush including creams, pessaries, an oral capsule and sometimes a combination of some of these options—please note most topical treatments can take up to 3 days before they start to ease symptoms; if your symptoms are still present after 7 days, consult your pharmacist/doctor again.

Oral Capsules

This treatment consists of a single oral capsule, that can be taken at any time of day with or without food. It is a very convenient treatment; however, there are also some disadvantages over the alternative creams/pessaries. The oral tablets cannot be used in pregnancy or breastfeeding and it is important to note that they take at least 24 hours to start working in the body and give symptom relief. This is why they are often combined with a cream (which will give some fast relief of external symptoms while the oral capsule is slowly but surely working internally). It is also important to note their over-the-counter use is not indicated for men.

Pessaries

Pessaries are tablets that are inserted into the vagina using a provided applicator. This is an effective and easy method of treatment, and is often the preferred method during pregnancy, as the pessary may be inserted without the applicator. Pessaries should be used at night before bedtime and they do come in a combination pack with cream for fast relief of external symptoms. **(IMPORTANT: PESSARIES ARE NOT TO BE TAKEN ORALLY—THEY ARE INSERTED INTO THE VAGINA)**

Creams

The creams must be used at night before bedtime and are inserted into the vagina using the applicator included in the pack. These are a safe, effective treatment; however, some patients can find them messy to use.

Additional products for "Optimal Care" of your condition

It is important for you to have the best possible advice, care and products to treat your condition. The pharmacist may suggest the following to you:

- Soap substitute wash for the genital area
- Hypo-allergenic (non-scented) toilet paper
- Acidophilus supplementation (which contains "good bacteria" for the body which may "re-balance" the system. By boosting good bacteria, this makes it harder for the "bad stuff" to grow. Ethical Nutrients have a product specifically designed for the vagina—Inner Health Candex (see picture right). Please note that research into the use of "probiotics" for this condition is "inconclusive" and these products should always be used in conjunction with a thrush treatment from your pharmacist.
- External anti-fungal cream to accompany an oral thrush capsule or pessary.



Lifestyle Advice

How do I try and prevent vaginal thrush?

- When going to the toilet, ensure you wipe from front to back. This will prevent spread of Candida from the bowel/anus to the vagina.
- Dry the genital area thoroughly after showers, baths, swimming etc.
- Avoid using any perfumed sprays, douches or antiseptics on the genital area. These products may cause further irritation.
- Consider wearing well-fitted, cotton underwear. Avoid wearing tight-fitting pants and synthetic underwear.
- Avoid perfumed toilet papers, menstrual products and fabric softeners.
- Use soap substitutes to wash the genital area. Pure sorbolene cream is an inexpensive and effective option. Apply before the area is wetted and rinse off lightly. This will leave a slight greasy film, thus serving to protect from irritants.

Is there anything else I should be doing when treating vaginal thrush?

- Thrush treatments can weaken condoms and diaphragms, so it is important to apply the treatments after you have had sex.
- Thrush is not an STD; however, male partners may sometimes experience redness and irritation after sexual intercourse with an infected partner. Consider treatment of partner if symptoms occur.

If I am pregnant or breastfeeding, do I have to take any extra precautions?

- During pregnancy, one-in-five women will develop vaginal thrush, due to the hormonal changes in the body causing an increased amount of "glycogen" (a type of sugar) in the vaginal environment. Therefore, it is important for pregnant women to consider the life-

style advice for "prevention" previously detailed.

- The oral tablets are not recommended for use during pregnancy. However, we can safely use some of the topical cream/pessary options. Please note that all treatments are "Pharmacist Only"; therefore, pharmacist involvement is essential.
- Pharmacists will advise pregnant patients that the use of applicators during pregnancy is not recommended and to use their finger to insert the cream/pessary as an alternative.

What if the first treatment didn't work?!

- Ensure you have taken on the lifestyle advice previously mentioned.
- Speak to your pharmacist to discuss the condition and treatment so far. The pharmacist may have another alternative treatment for you; otherwise, they may refer on to a medical practitioner if they see fit.
- Single doses of topical cream/pessary are usually only effective for first or infrequent episodes. Consider 6 or 7 day treatment therapy (refer to next page for options).
- Optimal treatment for recurrent vaginal thrush has not been established; however, your pharmacist may suggest a management plan to use until remission of symptoms. This may take between 2 weeks to 6 months. Please note that the pharmacist may need to also refer you onto your doctor for accurate diagnosis in recurrent cases.
- There is a possibility that the symptoms are not from a thrush (Candida) infection. Two other common vaginal infections include *Trichomoniasis* and *Bacterial vaginosis*; both of these conditions requiring consultation with your doctor for correct diagnosis/treatment.

Vaginal Thrush Products

Most (if not all) of these popular products will be available in our pharmacies. The information below will give you some detail on what they are and how to use them; however, please remember your pharmacist will always recommend the most appropriate treatment for each and every patient and must be involved in the sale of any thrush treatment in the pharmacy.

| Treatment Options | Brand examples |
|---|---|
| <p>Oral capsule Active ingredient(s): <i>Fluconazole 150mg</i> Comments: Take 1 capsule with a glass of water at any time of the day. Very convenient; however takes approx 24 hrs to provide relief. Often recommended after treatment failure of topical therapy. Not recommended in pregnancy and breastfeeding. E.g. Diflucan, Amcal Femazole, Canesoral, Chemists Own Femazole</p> |  |
| <p>Oral capsule with anti-fungal cream Active ingredient(s): <i>Fluconazole 150mg capsule + clotrimazole cream</i> Comments: As above, but with a small tube of cream included in packaging. Patient has the benefit of fast relief of external symptoms while the oral capsule is working internally. E.g. Diflucan Duo, Canesoral Duo, Chemists Own Femazole Duo</p> |  |
| <p>One pessary Active ingredient(s): <i>Clotrimazole 500mg pessary</i> Comments: Insert the pessary into the vagina at bedtime using the applicator. Important that pessary is NOT to be taken orally. E.g. Canesten Once Pessary</p> |  |
| <p>One pessary with anti-fungal cream Active ingredient(s): <i>Clotrimazole 500mg pessary + clotrimazole cream</i> Comments: Insert the pessary into the vagina at bedtime using the applicator. Use the cream 2-3 times a day for relief of external symptoms. E.g. Canesten Once Pessary + Cream</p> |  |
| <p>Six pessaries Active ingredient(s): <i>Clotrimazole 100mg pessary</i> Comments: Insert 1 pessary into the vagina at bedtime for 6 consecutive nights using the applicators. Preferred method of treatment for pregnant women. Important not to use applicators. E.g. Canesten 6 Day Pessary</p> |  |
| <p>Once cream Active ingredient(s): <i>Clotrimazole 10% cream</i> Comments: Insert 1 applicatorful of cream into the vagina at bedtime. Convenient one-time dose E.g. Canesten Once Cream</p> |  |
| <p>Three day cream Active ingredient(s): <i>Clotrimazole 2% cream</i> Comments: Insert 1 applicatorful of cream into the vagina at bedtime for 3 consecutive nights. E.g. Canesten 3 Day Cream</p> |  |
| <p>Six day cream Active ingredient(s): <i>Clotrimazole 1% cream</i> Comments: Insert 1 applicatorful of cream into the vagina at bedtime for 6 consecutive nights. E.g. Canesten 6 Day Cream, Amcal Anti Fungal V 6 Day Cream, Chemists Own Clozole Vaginal Cream</p> |  |
| <p>Seven day cream Active ingredient(s): <i>Miconazole 2% cream</i> Comments: Insert 1 applicatorful of cream into the vagina at bedtime for 7 consecutive nights. Often used as an alternative if clotrimazole allergy / treatment failure. E.g. Resolve Thrush Cream</p> |  |
| <p>Fourteen day cream Active ingredient(s): <i>Nystatin 100 000 units/dose cream</i> Comments: Insert 1 applicatorful of cream into the vagina once or twice daily for 14 days Another alternative to clotrimazole in cases of allergy / treatment failure. E.g. Nilstat Vaginal Cream</p> |  |