



# Vaginal Discharge (normal or abnormal?)



By: Bipandeep Abbat  
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Image courtesy of Ann Greaney, MD

Vaginal discharge is made by the skin cells of the vagina and cervix and some amount of it is normal! In fact, it serves many important functions for your body. For instance, it has a role in cleaning and moistening the vagina. It also serves to protect the vagina and urinary tract from infections.

## Normal Characteristics of Discharge:

The amount and consistency of discharge will vary from one woman to another. It even varies throughout your menstrual cycle and lifetime. These characteristics of discharge are influenced by a hormone in the body called estrogen. Therefore, factors that influence hormone levels can change the normal amount of discharge – things like menopause, puberty, pregnancy, and using hormonal birth control!



Let's talk about what normal discharge looks like depending on where you are in your menstrual cycle.

Part of the Cycle	Discharge
Menstruation (days 1 – 4)	Blood flow mixes with vaginal discharge
End of Menstruation (day 5)	Brownish discharge which is leftover blood (many women get concerned about this – don't worry!)
Days immediately after period (days 6 – 7)	Little to no discharge
Days leading up to ovulation (days 7 – 12)	Milky white discharge, thick and creamy in consistency. As estrogen levels are rising, there is increased discharge during this period!
Ovulation (days 13-14)	Consistency and colour of egg whites; highest amount of discharge at this point
Post-ovulation (days 15 – 28)	May vary in quantity; usually sticky discharge or little to no discharge

## Abnormal Discharge

There are many reasons for experiencing abnormal discharge. The following signs and symptoms are not normal and should encourage you to visit your doctor:

- Itching of the vulva, vaginal opening, or labia
- Redness, burning, soreness, or swelling of the vulvar skin
- Heavier than normal discharge
- Thicker than normal discharge
- Puslike
- Greyish, greenish, yellowish, or blood-tinged discharge
- White and clumpy discharge
- Bad odor
- Pain with intercourse or urination
- Abdominal or pelvic pain



Let's explore what can cause abnormal discharge. Specifically, let's talk about two common non-sexually transmitted infections that lead to abnormal discharge.

## Yeast Infection (Vulvovaginal Candidiasis)

Type of discharge:

- thick & clumpy white discharge (like cottage cheese) without a smell

What is it?

A type of yeast is a natural habitant of the vagina. A yeast infection occurs when it overgrows, and levels are higher than normal.

Causes

Certain factors increase the risk of a yeast infection:

- Diabetes
- Pregnancy
- Recent antibiotic use
- Weakened immune system

Other Symptoms

- Pain or burning during urination
- Vaginal and vulvar itching, pain, burning, redness, and/or swelling
- Pain during sex

Prevention

There are certain ways to reduce your risk of developing a yeast infection:

- Avoid unnecessary use of antibiotics
- Avoid douching
- Wear loose fitting, cotton underwear
- Eat a healthy diet and limit sugar intake

Testing

- A physician will ask questions such as your symptoms and medical history.
- The healthcare provider will then perform a pelvic exam and take a sample of the vaginal discharge which will be sent to get tested.

Treatment

- This will depend on many factors such as the severity of the current infection, and how often you get yeast infections. The options include an antifungal cream, ointment, oral pill, or ovule (tablet inserted into the vagina).



## Bacterial Vaginosis

Type of discharge:

- white or grey discharge, with a foul “fishy” odour which may worsen after sex

What is it?

- A type of infection that occurs when the “bad” bacteria outnumber the “good” bacteria in your vagina.

Causes

- The exact causes of this aren't known. Although this is not a sexually transmitted infection, it is more common in sexually active women and can be transferred between female sex partners.

Other Symptoms

- Usually not common

Prevention

Although exact causes aren't known, you can decrease your risk by avoiding activities that change balance of bacteria such as:

- Douching
- Smoking
- Having multiple sex partners

Testing

- A physician will ask questions such as your symptoms and medical history. The healthcare provider will then perform a pelvic exam and take a sample of the vaginal discharge which will be sent to get tested.

Treatment

- Antibiotics are the treatment for this infection. However, like treatment of yeast infections, they can be given in many forms such as: pills, cream, or ovules (a type of pill that gets put into the vagina).
- It's important to know that although symptoms may disappear within 2 – 3 days of treatment, the full course of antibiotics needs to be completed as prescribed.



Bipandee Abbat is a South-Asian woman who moved to Canada at the age of 8. She is currently completing her 3rd year of medical student at McMaster University. Throughout school, she has worked with various marginalized populations. She has a passion for social advocacy, public health, and knowledge translation. She aspires to be a medical leader in her community and empower patients by helping them learn more about their health.