

Vaginal Discharge

Introduction

Vaginal discharge may be caused by a range of physiological and pathological conditions. Vaginal infection, due to bacterial vaginosis (BV) and candidiasis often present in primary care, or less commonly trichomoniasis (TV). However, a number of women may have other conditions such as vulval dermatoses or allergic reactions. Cervical infection caused by chlamydia or gonorrhoea can also result in vaginal discharge and may need to be considered.

Diagnosis

The symptoms and signs that do occur are often non-specific to any particular infection, and a 'classical appearance' may not aid diagnosis. However, some are more indicative of one condition than another:

	Candida	BV	TV	Physiological
History				
Symptoms	10-20% asymptomatic	~ 50% asymptomatic	10-50% asymptomatic	
Discharge	Thick/white	Thin/grey	Thin/frothy	Clear/white
Smell	Not offensive	Fishy	Fishy	Odourless
Associated irritations	Itchy/sore Vulval oedema	Usually none, but maybe burning	Itchy/sore Dysuria	None
Investigations				
pH	≤ 4.5	> 5	>5	≤ 4.5
Swabs *	High vaginal swab	High vaginal swab	High vaginal swab	None

Always consider Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea if <25 years, partner change in last year, and continuation of symptoms if above have been excluded.

* Different laboratories will process a high vaginal swab in a variety of ways. You will need to be clear what your local lab does.

Management

See individual fact sheets