Vaginitis

Vaginitis, inflammation of the vagina, is responsible for an estimated 10% of all visits by women to their healthcare practitioners. The three general causes of vaginitis are hormonal imbalance, irritation, and infection. Hormone-related vaginitis includes the atrophic vaginitis generally found in postmenopausal or postpartum women, and occasionally in young girls before puberty. Irritant vaginitis can result from allergies or irritating substances. Infectious vaginitis is most common in reproductive-age women and is generally caused by one of three types of infections: bacterial vaginosis (BV), candidiasis (yeast infection), or trichomoniasis. A healthcare professional should be consulted for the diagnosis and treatment of any vaginal infection.

Lifestyle changes that may be helpful:
Yeast infections are three times more common in women who wear nylon underwear or tights than in those who wear cotton underwear.[1] Additional predisposing factors for candida infection include the use of antibiotics, oral contraceptives, or adrenal corticosteroids (such as prednisone).

Underlying health conditions that may predispose someone to candida overgrowth include pregnancy, diabetes, and HIV infection. Allergies have also been reported to promote the development of recurrent yeast vaginitis. When the allergens are avoided and the allergies treated, often the chronic recurring yeast infections resolve.[2] In most cases, sexual transmission is not thought to play a role in candida vaginitis. However, in persistent cases, sexual transmission should be considered, and the sexual partner should be examined and treated.

For irritant vaginitis, minimizing friction and reducing exposure to perfumes, chemicals, and irritating lubricants and spermicides can be beneficial.

Dietary changes that may be helpful:
Some nutritionally oriented doctors believe that a well-balanced diet low in fats, sugars, and refined foods is important for preventing vaginal infections caused by candida. In one uncontrolled study, avoidance of sugar, dairy products, and artificial sweeteners resulted in a sharp reduction in the incidence and severity of candida vaginitis.[3] Many nutritionally oriented doctors advise women who have a yeast infection (or are predisposed to such infections) to limit their intake of sugar, fruit juices, and refined carbohydrates. For persistent or recurrent infections, some doctors recommend that fruit also be avoided. Food allergies are believed to be a contributory factor in some cases of recurrent irritant vaginitis.

In a controlled study, women who consumed 8 ounces of acidophilus yogurt per day had a threefold decrease in the incidence of vaginal yeast infections and a reduction in the frequency of candida colonization in the vagina.[4]

In another study, women who ingested 45 grams of soy flour or 25 grams of flaxseeds per day showed an improvement in the estrogen effect on their vaginal
epithelial tissue. That observation suggests that supplementing with either of these foods may be helpful for preventing or reversing atrophic vaginitis.

**Nutritional supplements that may be helpful:**

*Lactobacillus acidophilus* is a strain of friendly bacteria that is an integral part of normal vaginal flora. Lactobacilli help maintain the vaginal microflora by preventing overgrowth of unfriendly bacteria and candida. Lactobacilli produce lactic acid, which acts like a natural antibiotic; these friendly bacteria also compete with other organisms for the utilization of glucose. The production of lactic acid and hydrogen peroxide by lactobacilli also helps to maintain the acidic pH that is needed for healthy vaginal flora to thrive. Most of the research has used yogurt containing live cultures of *Lactobacillus acidophilus* or the topical application of such yogurt or *Lactobacillus acidophilus* into the vagina.

Some doctors of natural medicine recommend vitamin E, either orally, topically, or intravaginally, for certain types of vaginitis. Vitamin E as a suppository in the vagina or vitamin E oil can be used once or twice per day for three to fourteen days to soothe the mucous membranes of the vagina and vulva. Some doctors of natural medicine recommend intravaginal administration of vitamin A to improve the integrity of the vaginal tissue and to enhance the function of local immune cells. Vitamin A can be administered intravaginally by inserting a vitamin A capsule or using a prepared vitamin A suppository. Vitamin A used this way can be irritating to local tissue, so it should not be used more than once per day for up to seven consecutive days.

Boric acid capsules inserted in the vagina have been used successfully to treat yeast vaginitis. One study demonstrated that 98% of women who used boric acid capsules were cured of chronic recurring yeast vaginitis.[6]

**Are there any side effects or interactions?**

Refer to the individual supplement for information about any side effects or interactions.

**Herbs that may be helpful:**

Topically applied tea tree oil has been studied and used successfully as a topical treatment for *Trichomonas, Candida albicans*, and other vaginal infections.[7] Some nutritionally oriented physicians suggest using tea tree oil by mixing the full-strength oil with vitamin E oil in the proportion of one-third tea tree oil to two-thirds vitamin E oil. Saturate a tampon with this mixture or put the mixture in a capsule to be inserted in the vagina each day for a maximum of six weeks.

The growth of *Candida albicans* is inhibited by garlic.[8] Although no scientific studies demonstrate its effectiveness in humans, some doctors recommend that women with candida vaginitis supplement with garlic capsules orally or insert garlic capsules or a raw peeled clove of garlic into the vagina daily for several days. Eating one clove of uncooked garlic per day or taking a supplement containing 5,000 mcg of allicin is also recommended in order to increase the effectiveness of the intravaginal remedy.
Teas of goldenseal, barberry, and echinacea are also sometimes used to treat infectious vaginitis. Although all three plants are known to be antibacterial in the test tube, the effectiveness of these herbs against vaginal infections has not been tested in humans. The usual approach is to douche with one of these teas twice each day, using 1–2 tablespoons of herb per pint of water. One to two pints are usually enough for each douching session. Echinacea is also known to improve immune function in humans.[9] In order to increase resistance against infection, many doctors of natural medicine recommend oral use of the tincture or alcohol-preserved fresh juice of echinacea in the amount of 1 teaspoon (5 ml) three or more times per day—during all types of infection—to improve resistance.

**Are there any side effects or interactions?**

Refer to the individual herb for information about any side effects or interactions.

**References:**