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# Feeling yeasty?

**DATO' DR NOR ASHIKIN  
MOKHTAR** *explains what causes an  
overgrowth of yeast in the vagina.*

**A** vaginal yeast infection is one of the most irritating yet common conditions that affect women. In fact, it is so common that about 75% of women will have a yeast infection at some point in their lives. Of these, almost half will have recurrent infections, meaning two or more infections later on in life.

In this article, I will share some basic facts about this condition, and also answer some burning questions about the link between yeast infections and sex.

## What is a yeast infection?

Yeast infection is also called candidiasis, and is due to the fungus *Candida albicans* that infects the vagina.

You must be wondering why yeast would grow in the vagina. In fact, it is natural to find small amounts of yeast living in the vagina under normal conditions. However, the natural acidity of the vagina can be unbalanced, causing the yeast to overgrow and cause an infection.

The infection will then cause irritation of the vagina and the vulva (the area around the vagina). This may cause you to suffer extreme itchiness in and around the vagina. This may be accompanied by a thick, white, odourless vaginal discharge that has the texture of cottage cheese.

You may also notice other symptoms like burning, redness and swelling of the vagina and vulva, pain upon urinating, and pain or discomfort during sex.



## What causes it?

Vaginal yeast infections are usually caused by a weakened immune system that can lead to changes in the acidity of the vagina. The various conditions that can lower a woman's immune defences are stress, lack of sleep,

sickness, poor diet, extreme intake of sugary foods, pregnancy, menstruation and disease such as poorly controlled diabetes and HIV infection.



You may also find that taking certain medications can increase your risk of getting a yeast infection, such as birth control pills, antibiotics and steroid medicines.

What about sex? Some women believe that they can get yeast infections through sexual intercourse with their partners. However, this is actually very rare.

A woman could be at higher risk if she has unprotected intercourse with a partner who has a yeast infection, but this condition is rare in men. There is a slightly higher risk following oral sex given by men who carry yeast organisms in their mouth.

Nonetheless, yeast infections are not likely to be transmitted from partner to partner. Having said that, however, other infections can be contracted sexually, and women should always practise safe sex with their partners.

## Don't be shy — see a doctor

It can be embarrassing to admit that you have symptoms of a vaginal infection. However, it is important that you overcome your shyness and see your GP or gynaecologist.



Sometimes, the signs of a yeast infection are similar to that of sexually transmitted diseases, such as chlamydia and gonorrhoea. Getting a medical check-up could help you determine whether you have a yeast infection or something more serious.

A yeast infection is easily diagnosed. Your doctor will examine you to look for swelling and discharge. He or she may also take a sample from your vagina and examine that under the microscope to look for yeast organisms.

Treatment is often in the form of antifungal creams, tablets, ointments or suppositories (inserted into the vagina).

Do not attempt to treat the infection yourself — always get your doctor's advice, even if you want to use over-the-counter medicines. Taking antifungal medications when you don't have a yeast infection could make your condition worse and increase your risk of getting a resistant strain of infection in the future.

### Avoiding repeat infections

It is very common for women to develop recurrent yeast infections, even several in one year. Here are some tips to prevent another yeast infection from occurring:

- ❖ Don't use douches.
- ❖ Avoid scented hygiene products like bubble bath, sprays, pads and tampons.
- ❖ Change tampons and pads frequently when you are menstruating.
- ❖ Don't wear clothing or underwear that are tight in the crotch.
- ❖ Wear cotton underwear or pantyhose with a cotton crotch.
- ❖ Change out of wet swimsuits and exercise clothes as soon as possible.
- ❖ Keep your vaginal area clean.
- ❖ After a shower or bath, dry the vaginal area completely before getting dressed.

- ❖ After using the toilet, always wipe from front to back.
- ❖ Avoid sharing towels with others.
- ❖ Don't take antibiotics unless prescribed by your doctor.
- ❖ Eat a diet high in vegetables, protein and grains, and avoid processed foods, sugars and alcohol.
- ❖ Abstain from sex while undergoing treatment for a yeast infection.
- ❖ If you are experiencing chronic yeast infections and are using birth control pills, consider changing your birth control method.

Finally, see your doctor for more advice about avoiding repeat yeast infections. Ignoring it won't make it go away. ❖

Data' Dr. Nor Ashikin Maliktar is a consultant obstetrician & gynaecologist (FRCOG, UK). For further information, e-mail [www.primanora.com](mailto:www.primanora.com). The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplement or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. My Child Malaysia does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. My Child Malaysia disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.





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81-11, TTD Plaza, Jalan PPR 1/1, 13700 Telok Pangkajene, Pulau Pinang.  
 Contact: Tel: 04-226 1111, 04-226 1112, 04-226 1113  
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