

Thrush? Don't worry, you're not alone!

Thrush. It's one of those conditions that it's just 'not nice' to talk about, but maybe it should be – because around 75% of women will get at least one bout of this annoying condition in their life. Some women are regularly afflicted, and although it's undoubtedly irritating, mildly embarrassing and inconvenient, it's nothing to be ashamed of or overly worried about.

What causes thrush?

Thrush is just caused by a yeast called Candida. We all have this yeast in our system, and it doesn't usually cause any problems, but sometimes the healthy bacteria on the skin and the vagina that keep Candida in check can get out of kilter, and this allows the yeast to multiply. The natural pH balance in the vagina is slightly acidic, and if the acidity drops, this can also be like a 'welcome' mat to Candida, and the organism may start to multiply. Candida likes warm, damp, moist conditions – which is why it commonly appears in the vagina, groin and mouth. Babies also get thrush in the nappy area. So, no, it most certainly isn't a sexually transmitted infection.

The most likely reason for the Candida to start getting rampant and causing an infection are taking antibiotics (because they destroy the healthy bacteria along with the bacteria they are supposed to kill), pregnancy, menopause, hormonal upsets and anything that upsets the balance of the immune system – stress, chemotherapy, or high doses of steroids.

Other triggers for thrush can be simple things like a reaction to perfumed soaps, shower gels and bubble bath; using tampons; wearing nylon tights and underwear made from synthetic materials. None of the triggers or causes of thrush casts any kind of aspersion on your sexual behaviour whatsoever.

What should I do if I have thrush?

Ok, now here's the bit that you're probably dreading – telling your partner. If you're sexually active, you need to tell your partner you have thrush because you shouldn't have sex while you have it as you will just keep passing the thrush backwards and forwards to each other. Men don't always get the infection even if you have it, and they very rarely get any symptoms if you do pass it on to them, but they can still pass it back to you and give you another lot of unpleasant symptoms. Your partner could also be under the misconception that thrush is an STI, but as mentioned before, it's nothing of the sort. It just likes warm, damp places!

Thrush is harmless and easy to treat, and if your partner does notice any symptoms on his penis, which can happen, make sure he is treated at the same time as you, and don't have sex until the infection has cleared up. Not that you are likely to want to, as the pain can be excruciating!

If you have never had thrush before, you should see your GP or practice nurse before self-treating, to make sure that you actually have thrush and not any other type of similar infection. If you've been having unprotected sex, this is especially important, because you need to rule out anything more serious. The nurse might need to take swabs, or might just be able to diagnose you based on your symptoms. It's important to make sure before you start self-treating though. If it's not your first bout, and the symptoms are the same as last time, you're fine to treat yourself and don't need to see a doctor every time you get it unless it's recurring (you've had it more than twice in the last six months.)

Different types of treatment

You can treat the condition with an over the counter medication – a one dose oral capsule, a pessary, or cream. These all work to kill off the Candida, and the only difference is how, and how fast! Some people prefer capsules because they are less messy, even though they may take slightly longer to work; pessaries can be very effective but some women find them uncomfortable to use; and the creams can be soothing but also inconvenient.

For a complete thrush treatment you should use a product to clear the internal infection as well as a topical product to relieve the external symptoms.

If you want to look at holistic methods, acidophilus tablets are thought to be useful in helping to build up the levels of 'good' healthy bacteria in your body and may help to prevent further attacks.

If you have thrush on a recurring basis, you should speak to your doctor and see if there is an underlying reason for the symptoms.

Common thrush myths

- Taking the contraceptive pill can cause thrush – Undecided. The jury is still out on this one, although there doesn't seem to be much evidence to suggest that using the pill can leave you more prone to thrush
- Thrush is a sexually transmitted disease – this one is very definitely false, even if your partner pulls a face when you tell them why sex is out of the question for a while. The yeast responsible for thrush is in our bodies, and women who are not sexually active get thrush too
- Thrush always causes a discharge – False. Contrary to popular belief, thrush doesn't always lead to the thick, white discharge that's commonly associated with it. Sometimes you just get itching, maybe some redness or slight swelling. Often, there is no discharge, or just a slight one

- Thrush is very smelly - False. If you have thrush you shouldn't notice any unpleasant odour at all. If there's anything, it will be a yeasty smell, and if there's any unpleasant smells at all, you probably haven't got thrush and should see the doctor
- Thrush can be prevented by douching the vagina – Definitely false. The vagina is self cleaning; vaginas do not need soaps or antiseptic solutions to keep them clean or fresh. In fact, over cleansing can lead to the opposite problem, as the chemicals can strip the body of natural bacteria and upset the acidity levels, which can leave you more prone to thrush in the first place
- Thrush can cause problems in pregnancy – False. If you get thrush when you are pregnant, it can't hurt your baby, as it can't spread to your uterus. Just make sure that you tell the pharmacist, so that you get the appropriate treatment for a pregnant woman

Summary:

- Thrush is most definitely not a sexually transmitted disease
- Around 75% of women will suffer from thrush at least once in their lives
- It's unlikely that you will pass thrush on to a male sexual partner. But you do need to tell him that you have it
- See your doctor if it's your first experience of thrush, or if you've had it twice in the past six months
- Thrush is very easy to treat and nothing to be embarrassed about

References:

1. Reporting on a study conducted at Niigata University School of Medicine back in 1961, the Japanese Journal of Microbiology stated: the fungicidal effect of Caprylic acid on Candida Albicans was exceedingly powerful.'

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

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