Dear Alice,

I've just had my first condom break ever. I'm on the pill, so I'm not worried about pregnancy, but a couple of days afterwards I had yeast infection-like symptoms—no unusual discharge, just itching. If I pick up some over-the-counter yeast infection medication and the symptoms go away, would I be safe to assume that was the problem? Or should I definitely go in for an STI check?

Signed,

?Broken

Answer

Dear Broken,

Right on with that back-up method of birth control! Not having to worry about an unplanned pregnancy after the condom rupture is probably a big relief. If you don't have any symptoms besides itching, you probably don't have a yeast infection. You may have a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or some other vaginal ailment.

There are various sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and a few common ailments unrelated to sex that include itching as a symptom. The most common STI that causes itching is trichomoniasis. Trichomoniasis (or trich, pronounced "trick") is caused by microscopic protozoa. It usually produces large amounts of discharge and can be treated with medication. Often, herpes also begins as an itch in the vaginal area. Herpes may progress to blistered sores that tingle or burn. Because so many people carry the herpes virus, doctors don't usually test for it unless sores are visible. Pubic lice also make you want to scratch. They come in three forms: nit, nymph, and adult and are diagnosed by looking for the little beasties on your pubes.
In the non-STI category, yeast and bacterial infections are another common cause of vaginal itching and are often accompanied by unusual discharge, burning, and pain. If you don't have these other symptoms, it's probably best not to use yeast medication because the medication itself can upset the bacterial balance in your vagina. Check out the related Q&As for more info about yeast infections and other forms of non-specific vaginitis, which may also produce an itchy vulva. Wearing cotton underwear and loose-fitting pants, using mild body soap and laundry detergent, and avoiding douching may help with vaginal itching. If your itching doesn't go away in a week or so, you may want to see a health care provider to help with a diagnosis.

In any case, because many STIs are asymptomatic (meaning you can't see or feel any signs) it's also a good idea to get annual screenings for things like chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HIV if you are having sex with a new partner, and especially if you have reason to believe you may have been exposed to something. You might want to encourage your partners to be tested as well. Any treatment you apply/receive, your partner should also receive. This will help prevent the passage of certain infections back and forth. Getting tested may help give you and your partner peace of mind, and allow you to fully enjoy the pleasures of sex.

Alice!
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Published date:
Oct 01, 1993
Last reviewed on:
Jul 30, 2014
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