

What is normal vaginal discharge? ^[1]

Alice,

I've been trying to find out what exactly is "normal" vaginal discharge. Do all women have some sort of discharge at various times through their cycle (at ovulation, for example)? When is a discharge something you should be concerned about, and go to see a health professional?

Mushy

Answer

Dear Mushy,

While vaginal discharge can sometimes be cloudy, your understanding of what's normal needn't be! Discharge is common to all folks with vaginas, and it helps vaginas stay healthy by regularly flushing them out and maintaining the balance of healthy bacteria in the vagina. Discharge is often present throughout the menstrual cycle (which can vary) — even those who have not begun menstruating can have vaginal discharge. It's also common to notice some discharge after using the bathroom or to find wet or dried discharge in your underwear. Everyone's a bit different, so to determine what's normal for you, you can use your fingers to find out what your discharge looks and smells like on any given day. This kind of self-check can be useful; familiarizing yourself with the texture and smell of your vaginal discharge at various times of the month can help you to identify when it may be a good idea to check in with your health care provider.

Here are some key characteristics to look out for to determine if your vaginal discharge is normal or if there's a cause for concern:

- **Color:** Normal discharge is usually clear or white in color, and sometimes can look more yellowish when it dries. However, if it looks yellow, green, or gray it may be a sign that something is wrong (possibly infection, irritation, etc.).
- **Scent:** Most of the time discharge has a very mild scent (or no scent at all). But if you notice a strong, foul, "fishy" odor or a sudden change to your odor, it may be a cause for concern.
- **Texture:** Normal texture can vary from paste-like (in color and consistency) and somewhat sticky to clear and stretchy, depending on where you are in your cycle and whether you're

aroused. Abnormal discharge can look clumpy or lumpy, resembling cottage cheese or have a foamy texture.

- **Volume:** This can vary from very little to quite a lot (particularly when ovulating or aroused). You might want to see a health care professional if you do notice sudden changes in volume, especially if other symptoms are present.

It's normal to have some variation in vaginal discharge during your menstrual cycle and different vaginas can have different levels of discharge. Factors, such as pregnancy and hormonal birth control methods may also make discharge heavier than normal. Your discharge can also change over the course of your life. However, changes in the color, consistency, amount, or smell of vaginal secretions that are unlike your normal monthly changes may be a reason to be concerned.

There are many possibilities of why abnormal discharge is occurring, such as infections and irritations. Some common infections associated with abnormal discharge include bacterial vaginosis (BV), yeast infections, and trichomoniasis. Infections are more likely to occur immediately before and during your period, when the vaginal environment is at its least acidic. Irritations of the vagina, which lead to abnormal discharge, can be caused by douches, deodorant sprays, perfumed soaps, sex, allergies, and changing hormone levels. Abnormal vaginal discharge can also be accompanied by itching, vaginal redness or soreness, rash, burning sensation when peeing, or pain. This could be an indicator of vaginitis, which refers to any irritation or infection of the vagina. Because there are many potential causes of atypical vaginal discharge, visiting your health care provider is the easiest way to determine what might be going on if you have any symptoms or notice changes in what's normal for you.

Hopefully this helps clear things up!

Alice!

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Published date:

Jan 14, 2000

Last reviewed on:

Aug 12, 2016

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