

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

CYTOLYTIC VAGINOSIS

WHAT IS IT?

Cytolytic vaginosis is a vaginal condition that involves an overgrowth of lactobacilli bacteria. Lactobacilli are a normal part of the vaginal environment. In low numbers, lactobacilli found in vaginal discharge are considered protective against microorganisms, such as yeast.

Cytolytic vaginosis is not an infection. It is also not a sexually transmitted illness. Its existence is controversial as not all medical providers accept it as a stand-alone diagnosis.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

No one knows for sure. It appears to be a pH problem that causes a disruption in the natural balance of bacteria found in the vagina. This leads to an overgrowth of lactobacilli and increased acidity which can result in vaginal irritation.

Frequently, a woman may present with chronic vaginal discharge that has been treated with a variety of antifungals and antibiotics. These treatments can provoke a change in the vaginal pH leading to an overgrowth of lactobacilli.

Other triggers may include sensitivity to soaps, wipes, pads, lubricants, etc.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Common symptoms include:

- Itching of the vagina or skin outside the vagina (the vulva).
- Burning of the vulva. Symptoms may be worse with urination and can mimic the burning associated with a urinary tract infection.
- Increased white or yellowish vaginal discharge, which can vary in consistency.
- Pain with sex or soreness following sex.

The symptoms of cytolytic vaginosis are often confused with those of a yeast infection or bacterial vaginosis. However, cytolytic vaginosis symptoms tend to be worse during the week prior to menstruation (because of higher levels of lactobacilli during this menstrual phase) and relieved during menstrual flow (because menstrual blood is more basic, which helps to neutralize the overly acidic vaginal environment).

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

Your medical provider will perform a pelvic exam and take a sample of your vaginal discharge to examine under the microscope. The presence of characteristic cellular changes, excessive lactobacilli, and small numbers of white blood cells help to confirm the diagnosis. Testing will also show a low vaginal pH between 3.5 and 4.5. There should be no signs of yeast, bacterial vaginosis, or *Trichomonas*.

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WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?

The goal of treatment is to increase the vaginal pH and restore lactobacilli numbers back to normal. This is accomplished by using baking soda (or sodium bicarbonate) treatments. Avoiding possible triggers may also be helpful.

❖ Baking Soda Treatments

- **Baking soda douche:**
 - Dissolve 1 rounded teaspoon of baking soda in 600 mL of warm water, and douche once daily for 7-14 days.
 - Alternatively, you can dissolve 1-2 tablespoons of baking soda in 4 cups of warm water, and douche twice a week for 2 weeks.
 - A douche bag can be purchased at most pharmacies.
 - Over-the-counter baking soda douches are also available.
- **Baking soda vaginal suppository:**
 - Fill empty gelatin capsules with baking soda. Insert 1 capsule into the vagina twice a week for 2 weeks.
 - Gelatin capsules can be purchased at health food stores.
- **Baking soda paste:** This can be helpful if you are experiencing irritation of the skin outside the vagina. Make a watery paste with baking soda, and apply it daily to irritated skin.
- **Baking soda sitz bath:** Dissolve 2-4 tablespoons of baking soda in 2 inches of warm water in a tub. Soak for 15-20 minutes twice daily to a few times a week. Then decrease to once or twice per week to prevent recurrences.

Consult your medical provider if symptoms do not improve after 2-3 weeks of treatment.

❖ Lifestyle Changes

- Use menstrual pads instead of tampons (because menstrual flow increases vaginal pH).
- Avoid soap in the vaginal area. Wash with plain water. If you need soap, use a pH-balanced unscented bar soap, such as Olay or Dove. Avoid liquid soaps as they are more concentrated.
- Avoid scented hygiene products, like vaginal sprays, powders, toilet paper, pads, etc.
- Change out of wet clothing (eg. swimsuits, exercise clothing) as soon as possible.
- Avoid tight clothing.
- Wear cotton underwear. Sleeping without underwear may also help.
- Consider avoiding sex until symptoms have improved.