



Vaginal Itching

It's one of those embarrassing, private women's issues that we don't even want to talk to the doctor about: when things get really itchy downstairs. What do you do when you feel that itch downstairs returning yet again? Reach for the trusty tube of Canesten without consulting the doctor? That's a mistake. There are at least 5 things that could be causing your annoying itch aside from vaginal thrush, and self-treatment without diagnosis can be a bad move.

What causes itching in the vulva? I like to divide the causes into 3 main groups: infectious, hormonal and mucosal.

Infectious Causes

Thrush is usually the first thing we think of: the yeast infection of the vagina that's so common in women, often associated with the famed thick, white, "cottage cheese" discharge, but not always. However, as women, we are not as good at diagnosing thrush as we think. The identical symptom of itching can indicate a number of the sexually transmitted infections, or the lesser known bacterial vaginosis. All of these infectious causes need to be treated completely differently, and using an over-the-counter topical thrush treatment can cause more harm than good if thrush is not the problem.. Also, you'll want to look at how you can prevent infection. Low iron and low zinc levels both predispose to imbalance in vaginal flora ("good bugs"). The bottom line is, if you experience itching of the vulval area, see your doctor and specifically ask them to do a swab to rule out any of these infections and why you're getting them. You can't win the war if you don't know who the enemy is.

Hormonal Causes

There are three main hormonal issues that can be associated with vulval itching. Firstly, the protective vaginal flora, chiefly composed of lactobacilli, alters throughout a woman's cycle. Women who are prone to an imbalance of flora with too many "bad bugs" (bacterial vaginosis) are more likely to experience this at certain parts of the cycle. However, there are more implications of hormones than this. Low levels of oestrogen, such as when you are breastfeeding or post-menopausal, lead to a drop in protective lactobacilli, vaginal dryness and sensitivity. But, you can also have "too much of a good thing" – or rather, too much and the wrong type of oestrogen. Exogenous oestrogen – that is, artificial oestrogens you ingest (namely, the Pill) – causes a drop in protective vaginal flora (lactobacilli), and will make you more prone to thrush.

Mucosal Causes

Ultimately, it is the irritation of the vaginal mucosa that causes itching, and this can happen with or without an infection. For example, the thrush organism, *Candida albicans*, is a normal part of a woman's intestinal and vaginal flora to a degree. If it increases and produces an overgrowth, this can cause symptoms of vulval itching. However, even if there is not an overgrowth, some women are more sensitive to the *Candida* organism than others, and small amounts of *Candida* that equate with

a “normal” vaginal swab can still cause symptoms of itching. There are several other conditions of the vulva that might cause itching. Eczema is a skin condition that can occur anywhere in the body, including the vulva. If you have eczema elsewhere, it increases the likelihood that the itching is due to this. Other less common conditions include lichen sclerosus and lichen planus. A review with a dermatologist is required to rule out these conditions as the causes of your itching.

In all cases of vulval itching, it is helpful to improve the health and resilience of the vaginal mucosa. There are several ways of doing this.

How to Improve the Health of the Vulva

1. Make sure there are healthy levels of moisture in this vulnerable tissue. The best way to do this is to add a decent amount of omega-3x to your diet via flaxseed oil, 1-2tb/day. Evening primrose oil, although an omega-6, used on a daily basis of 2-4 tsp is also excellent. Evening primrose oil can also be rubbed gently around the opening to the vagina, or an evening primrose oil capsule can be inserted before bed.
2. Improve your balance of gut flora (“good bugs”), and the balance of the vaginal flora will naturally follow. Most yoghurts do not contain sufficient quantities or the right strains of good flora. Look for a professional product containing a variety of lactobacilli and the yeast *Saccharomyces boulardii*, which actually inhibits *Candida* by “taking up its place”. The chosen probiotic should be gluten-free and dairy-free. A very good all-round product is In-Liven fermented probiotic superfood and its companion Fast Tract, both available on www.alyssatait.miessence.com. It is strongly recommended that you discuss your choice of probiotic with your women’s health practitioner. Maintain good gut flora by minimising refined carbohydrate intake, especially sugar.
3. Investigate what other health problems may be promoting the vaginal itching. If you experience abdominal bloating or digestive discomforts, you will need to address this. If you have problems with unstable blood glucose levels (for example, diabetes or insulin resistance, more common in polycystic ovarian syndrome) you will need to get on top of this with the help of your practitioner.
4. Respect this sensitive part of your body. Do not use vaginal “fresheners” or sprays, avoid unnatural lubricants containing petroleum byproducts. At Equilibria, we stock the best natural lubricant products. Trust your body’s natural cleansing abilities. You do not need to use soap on the vulva, and definitely need to avoid using it in the vagina.
5. Listen to your body’s signs. If the cream that was prescribed for you causes terrible stinging and burning, stop using it and let your practitioner know. It is possible to become sensitised to some of the ingredients in products, such as the preservatives.
6. Take care of your skin health overall. It is important to be getting enough protein, zinc and vitamin A for healthy tissue.