

Yeast and Pregnancy

In recent weeks, I have received numerous questions and concerns from women regarding yeast. This month's column will be devoted to discussing symptoms and causes of yeast overgrowth and treatments in pregnancy.

Yeast, candida, thrush, athlete's foot, monilia are different terms used for fungus that is found on the human body, in harmless or not-so-harmless quantities. Yeast lives on the skin, in the mouth, vagina, and rectum, thriving in and traveling between warm, moist, dark places.

A healthy digestive system has ample Lactobacillus acidophilus and other microorganisms that promote proper nutrient absorption. Yeast has an opposite effect in the digestive tract, inhibiting assimilation of essential amino acids and other nutrients. Lactobacilli should predominate in the healthy vaginal tract as well. Antibiotics are probably the main culprits in reducing the number of beneficial, balancing organisms in the digestive and vaginal tracts, allowing yeast and other fungi to proliferate. Stress and diets excessive in sugar, yeasted breads and beverages, and certain fermented foods also contribute to yeast proliferation.

How do you know when you have a yeast problem? Excess growth of yeast irritates skin and mucosal linings, can cause inflammation, redness, rashes, itching, burning, and white discharge. Rashes can spread over the buttocks or thighs. Vaginal discharge is often thick and cottage cheese-like, but can be light and runny. It is usually odorless or possessing an odor of yeasty bread.

Yeast overgrowth has not been shown to threaten pregnancy directly, though symptoms can be very uncomfortable and interfere with sleep and normal activities. High levels of yeast may cause chronic tiredness, sluggishness, digestive problems, bad breath, decreased immunity, strong cravings for sweets and breads, and recurrent fungal infections. Vaginal yeast can be difficult to eradicate because it burrows through several layers of tissue, and as surface tissue sloughs off, a new infection takes over. A woman with yeast overgrowth at the time of birth can pass the yeast into the baby's mouth and digestive tract. Most cases of thrush in the newborn are due to childbirth transmission.

As a midwife, the main reason yeast infection in a pregnant woman concerns me is that I see it as a message from the body signaling some imbalance. Our digestive and vaginal tracts are reliable communicators of our overall health.

Many women get their first vaginal yeast infection during pregnancy. There are several possible reasons for this: elevated body temperature in pregnancy; increased secretions generally; a higher circulating blood sugar level, as well as increased glycogen in the vaginal epithelium; and suppressed immune response. A pregnant woman who has a high-carb diet, abundant in refined or simple sugars, or who has lowered resistance due to antibiotic administration, lack of sleep, or emotional or physical stress is at high risk for a yeast infection. Gestational diabetes may make yeast infection more severe and recurrent due to increased sugar availability.

Yeast loves sugar. One previous client stated that whenever she craved sugar, she knew either that her blood sugar was low and she needed to eat, or that a yeast infection was coming on. Many women report that reducing sugar in their diets as soon as vaginal or anal itching or burning occurs is enough to restore everything to normal. Other women need to supplement with acidophilus twice a day to overcome symptoms. Some women find that intensely acidifying their system with 8 ounces a day of

unsweetened cranberry juice treats yeast infection. Cranberry may be taken in concentrated pill form as well.

For healthy flora maintenance in pregnancy I recommend daily consumption of organic unsweetened or stevia- sweetened yogurt with live cultures, and toward the end of pregnancy, supplementing with acidophilus twice a week. Animal products should be organic as much as possible due to low-level antibiotics found in commercial meat, dairy, eggs, and poultry. For women who do not eat dairy, I recommend daily acidophilus supplementation. Chlorophyll-rich foods, such as dark green vegetables, and raw sauerkraut help maintain and restore healthy flora. Minimizing soda, juices, and refined carbohydrates is important also. The above measures are especially important if taking antibiotics.

For persistent and recurrent vaginal yeast overgrowth, there are several effective holistic remedies with few or no side-effects. I prefer holistic treatments for yeast, because yeast overgrowth usually occurs in more than one place in the body, often for more than one reason. Both oral and topical approaches are important, because yeast easily spreads from the digestive to the vaginal tract.

In Healing With Whole Foods, Paul Pitchford recommends garlic as one of the best cures for vaginal yeast in particular. He suggest eating ½ clove raw, twice a day before meals for one month. (Some of my clients make a garlic toast to help the garlic go down.) Insert vaginally a whole peeled garlic clove, wrapped in one layer of gauze bandage or threaded with a needle and string. Place the clove before sleep and leave in over night. He recommends continuing overnight treatment five nights per week for one month, however, many of my clients have used this remedy successfully for shorter periods of time.

Pitchford also highly recommends green foods, cereal grasses in powder and pill form, and kelp and other seaweeds. Instead of acidophilus, he recommends *L. sporogenes* and *B. laterosporus*, taken on an empty stomach once or twice daily, depending on symptom severity.

Other excellent antifungals recommended by literature and my clients include:

- tea tree oil, 5 drops diluted in one cup warm water – drink daily and use to soak a tampon for overnight placement until symptoms subside. Rub undiluted tea tree oil on outer labia and skin for cool relief.
- grapefruit seed extract taken orally once or twice daily
- gentian violet 1% solution – paint labia and skin and soak tampon for overnight placement until symptoms subside. Gentian violet is bright purple and will stain, so care and an absorbent pad should be used.

Having a health professional confirm that persistent infection is yeast as opposed to another organism may be a good idea too.

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This text was originally published in the Willy Street Co-op Reader in the **Ask the Midwife** column, where Ingrid Andersson of Community Midwives, LLC in Madison, answers questions on pregnancy, childbirth and related topics. More of these articles can be found at Ingrid's website: www.gentlehomebirth.org