

Contact:
Kathryn Moschella/Anne Carlantone
Robin Leedy & Associates, Inc.
(914) 241-0086, ext. 14
kmoschella@robinleedyassociates.com

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SOMETIMES AN ITCH IS JUST AN ITCH, AND SOMETIMES IT'S NOT

Understanding the Difference Between Non-Infectious and Infectious Feminine Itch

WHITE PLAINS, N.Y., March 27, 2006 – Forty-three percent of U.S. women aged 18 and older indicated having experienced vaginal itching, and more than half of these women (57 percent) self-treat their itching with over-the-counter medications first, before going to the doctor, according to a recent survey commissioned by the Vagisil Women's Health CenterSM (VWHC)¹. Only five percent said they consult with their doctor at the first sign of external itch, yet only about one in eight (13 percent) indicates that she can always tell when external vaginal itch is the result of an infection.

“Feminine itching is a fairly common experience, as can be seen from the Vagisil survey, ranging from a mild external irritation or itch, to an intense, burning itch that can be both external and internal,” says Adelaide Nardone, M.D., clinical instructor of Ob/Gyn at Brown University Medical School, and an advisor to the VWHC for the past decade. “Yet many women do not fully understand the difference between itch that's the result of an infection, and itch that's not.”

This distinction, she adds, is key to proper treatment and should not be taken lightly.

¹ Survey Methodology

This survey, commissioned by the Vagisil Women's Health CenterSM, was conducted by Harris Interactive[®] from February 2-6, 2006, via its QuickQuerySM online omnibus, interviewing a nationwide sample of 1,372 U.S. women aged 18+. Data were weighted to be representative of the total U.S. adult population on the basis of region, age within gender, education, household income, race/ethnicity, and propensity to be online. In theory, with a probability sample of this size, one can say with 95 percent certainty that the overall results have a sampling error of plus or minus 4 percentage points of what they would be if the entire population of U.S. adult women had been polled with complete accuracy. Sampling error for the various sub-samples is higher and varies. This online sample is not a probability sample.

Non-Infectious Itch

Women can experience ‘non-infectious’ feminine itching for a variety of reasons, ranging from wearing tight clothing to excessive perspiration to monthly hormonal fluctuations. Vaginal dryness, sexual activity, dermatological conditions and even allergic reactions to soaps and detergents can be the sources as well.

“If you experience this type of itching and there are no other symptoms, such as unusual or foul odor or discharge, then you need to find the source of the irritation and itch,” advises Dr. Nardone. “Sometimes it’s a process of elimination, such as changing detergents or soap, and sometimes you need to play ‘detective’ and think about when the itching occurs, what you were wearing or what time of the month it was.”

According to Dr. Nardone, while you’re finding its source, itch can be relieved with an over-the-counter product, such as Vagisil[®] Anti-Itch Creme, which contains a topical analgesic, benzocaine, as well as skin-soothing vitamins E, A and D, and aloe. A more portable, discreet option is the use of new flushable Maximum Strength Vagisil[®] Anti-Itch Medicated Wipes, which can be carried easily in a purse or gym bag.

“As with any medication, follow the directions on the package and if the symptoms don’t subside within seven days contact your healthcare provider,” says Dr. Nardone.

Occasionally, more serious skin disorders such as lichen sclerosis, lichen planus, eczema or psoriasis can be the cause of painful or intense itching. These are inflammatory skin conditions that can affect the external genital area. While eczema and psoriasis will have the dry, red appearances that they commonly have on other areas of the body, lichen sclerosis may appear as white patches, sometimes containing purple bruising and a thin, wrinkled appearance.

“These non-infectious itches in the genital area can often be controlled with cortisone medications, but must be diagnosed by a physician to ensure correct treatment,” advises Dr. Nardone.

Infectious Itch

According to Dr. Nardone, the average healthy vagina has a number of organisms, including yeast and bacteria that normally thrive there, so a slight change in this delicate environment can lead to an infection that is accompanied by itching, irritation and burning.

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“Most women associate this type of intense itch with yeast,” says Dr. Nardone. “But yeast is not always the culprit.”

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) is actually the leading cause of vaginal complaints in the United States, but according to Dr. Nardone, a lot of women are not aware of it.

“Typical symptoms of BV that should not be ignored include an unpleasant, fish-like vaginal odor and excessive discharge that is thin and grayish in color,” says Dr. Nardone. “Some women report that the odor can be particularly bad after intercourse.”

BV is caused by a loss of the protective acid-producing bacteria known as lactobacilli, causing an imbalance of the bacteria that live in the vagina.² The cause for this imbalance is unknown and widely debated, ranging from sexual activity to birth control methods to douching.

“BV sometimes can cause abnormal Pap smears,” says Dr. Nardone. “Literature suggests that BV may increase a woman’s chance of contracting certain sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) during intercourse if her partner is infected.”

Treatment for BV is by prescription antibiotics in either oral or vaginal forms. There are no over-the-counter treatments for BV, though anti-itch creams or wipes may relieve any external itching or irritation while the antibiotics are working to treat the infection.

The more well-known “yeast” infection is caused by the fungus candida albicans, which often lives harmlessly in the vagina (getting into there by way of the anal area, sometimes being transferred by wiping in the wrong direction, sexual activity, pantyliners, pads, etc.). A yeast infection results when there is too much yeast, overwhelming the vaginal defense system. The result is severe vaginal itching and sometimes a curd-like discharge. Other symptoms can include vaginal soreness, irritation, vulvar burning or pain during intercourse or urination. Odor is not typically unusual or evident, but some women may notice a yeasty smell.

According to Dr. Nardone, certain yeast infections can be treated with over-the-counter antifungals or prescription Diflucan, while the accompanying external itch can be relieved with an anti-itch over-the-counter product, such as Maximum Strength Vagisil[®] Anti-Itch Creme or Medicated Wipes.

² *The V Book: A Doctor’s Guide To Complete Vulvovaginal Health* (Bantam Books, 2002), by Elizabeth Gunther Stewart, M.D.

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“If you suspect a yeast infection but have never had one before, it is wise to consult with your healthcare provider, who might suggest an examination,” advises Dr. Nardone.

For more information about women’s feminine health and the Vagisil® brand of feminine products, visit the Vagisil women’s Health CenterSM at www.vagisil.com.