Yeast infections

Understanding the causes

Patrick Quaile

Vaginal yeast infections are annoying but not life-threatening. The main symptoms are itching, pain on urination, and an unpleasant discharge from the vagina. Most women would rather learn how to prevent vaginal infections than have to treat them.

Some women treat yeast infection by visiting their drugstore, and often dealing with the discomfort of leakage. Information on prevention and alternative treatments is available yet sometimes difficult to find because pharmacists are not knowledgeable about them.

Mainstream antifungal medicines for yeast infections do not require prescriptions and are heavily advertised in the media. In response to these ads, many women may self-diagnose and use these powerful antifungal cremes too often. In some cases, women may use the cremes when there is no infection present. When this happens, the natural yeasts may become resistant to the medications, thrive, and multiply. Then a much stronger drug is required to clear up the resulting infection.
"A neutral pH level (7) allows yeast to thrive, but a healthy vagina has a pH level of less than 5, which is acidic and rich in lactic bacteria (lactobacillus)."

New statistics show that as many as 25 to 30 percent of yeast infections may now be resistant to over-the-counter treatments. This is bad news for women.

The right pH
Most vaginal yeast infections are caused by an improper pH level. The fungus Candida albicans plays a role in altering pH levels. Balance of pH in the vaginal area can also be adversely affected by diets high in sugar; drugs such as antibiotics, contraceptives, medicated douches, and certain vaginal medications; and conditions such as diabetes.

A neutral pH level (7) allows yeast to thrive, but a healthy vagina has a pH level of less than 5, which is acidic and rich in lactic bacteria (lactobacillus). An acidic environment protects the vagina from harmful bacteria, yeast, and other pathogens and also prevents these bacteria from reaching and infecting the fallopian tubes and ovaries, where they can cause infertility.

Protecting friendly bacteria
Lactic bacteria play an important role in the defence against pathogens by providing a balance of friendly flora in the region. A healthy vaginal environment contains lactic and coccoid bacteria. Lactobacilli help maintain healthy vaginal acidity (pH between 3.8 and 4.5), which inhibits the growth of too many coccoid bacteria. The loss of this vaginal acidity and the presence of too many coccoid bacteria lead to a condition known as bacterial vaginosis (BV).

A natural way to fend off infection and prevent BV is through probiotic supplementation. Probiotics containing Lactobacillus acidophilus inserted deep within the vaginal cavity can confer protection against infection for the entire vaginal area. Probiotics are available at health food stores, but if you think you may have a vaginal infection, it’s best to consult your natural health professional for sound advice.

Patrick Quaile is a health researcher with more than 23 years experience in the functional food industry.