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Cytolytic vaginosis

What is cytolytic vaginosis?

Cytolytic vaginosis is an occasional cause of vaginal discharge.

What is the cause of cytolytic vaginosis?

The normal vagina of an adult woman is colonised by lactobacilli. These bacteria produce lactic acid, which maintains an acid pH, and hydrogen peroxide, which is an antiseptic agent. The lactobacilli protect the vagina from pathogenic infections and are considered important for vaginal health.

Cytolytic vaginosis arises because of an overgrowth of the lactobacilli. They can irritate the cells that make up the vaginal lining, causing them to break up. The damaged or fragmented cells are then shed with the normal vaginal secretions.

What are the symptoms?

Many women with cytolytic vaginosis are unaware of it. It may be reported after a vaginal swab or cervical smear. However, they may have the following symptoms:

- Abundant whitish vaginal discharge
- Vaginal and/or vulval itching ([pruritus vulvae](#))
- Burning ([vulvodynia](#)), especially on passing urine (dysuria)
- Discomfort during sexual intercourse (dyspareunia)

The symptoms are very similar to those of [vaginal thrush](#). Like thrush, they may get worse in the second half of the menstrual cycle. However, high vaginal swabs do not culture the yeast that causes thrush, *Candida albicans*, and antifungal creams and tablets are not effective. The vaginal pH is acidic (3.3 to 5.5).

How is the diagnosis made?

Cytolytic vaginosis should be considered in women with vaginal symptoms that have not settled down or have recurred after treatment for thrush. A vaginal swab should be taken. The laboratory may report numerous lactobacilli and epithelial cells. There should be no sign of candida or other infective organisms.

What is the treatment for cytolytic vaginosis?

In most women, no specific treatment is required. Antifungal medications should be discontinued.

In those with symptoms, the following measures may be helpful

- Use pads instead of tampons for menstruation
- Taking soda sitz baths or bicarbonate douches to increase vaginal pH and thus discourage the growth of lactobacilli.

Related information

References:**On DermNet NZ:**

- [Pruritus vulvae](#)
- [Vulvodinia](#)
- [Vulvovaginal candidiasis](#)

Other websites:**Books about skin diseases:**

See the [DermNet NZ bookstore](#)

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DermNet does not provide an on-line consultation service.

If you have any concerns with your skin or its treatment, see a [dermatologist](#) for advice.

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