



Lancashire Gynaecologist

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Vaginal Microbiome:
what it means for your health

The hidden world of vaginal microbiome: what it means for your health

The vaginal microbiome is a bustling community of microbes that plays a vital role in our health and wellbeing. Understanding how this ecosystem works, what can disturb it, and how to support a healthy balance can empower you to make informed choices for your body. Here's a clear guide to help you navigate this important topic.



How the vaginal microbiome works

Vaginal microbiome is a dynamic community of bacteria, fungi, and other microorganisms that reside in the vaginal canal. In many healthy individuals, the dominant bacteria belong to the genus *Lactobacillus*, which help maintain an acidic environment that protects against harmful invaders.

A balanced microbiome acts like a first line of defence against infections. It supports vaginal health, reduces irritation and can influence aspects of sexual and reproductive health.

While there is variation among individuals, a typical healthy state often features a predominance of *Lactobacillus* species. The specific composition can change with age, hormonal fluctuations (e.g. puberty, pregnancy, menopause), sexual activity, hygiene practices and antibiotics.



Common disturbances and what they signal

Bacterial vaginosis (BV)

This is usually caused by a disruption in the normal *Lactobacillus*-dominated balance, with overgrowth of other bacteria. Symptoms include unusual vaginal discharge, a strong fishy or earthy odour, itching or irritation (less commonly).

Yeast infections (candidiasis)

This is often caused by an overgrowth of *Candida* species, due to hormonal changes, antibiotics, high-sugar diets or immune factors. Symptoms include itching, burning, thick white curd-like discharge, and discomfort during urination or intercourse.

Vaginal dryness or irritation

Possible changes in mucus production, hormonal shifts, irritation from products, or infections are often the cause of vaginal dryness. In addition to dryness symptoms include itching, burning or soreness.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

STIs are infections such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea, or trichomoniasis.

Symptoms tend to include abnormal discharge, burning during urination, pelvic pain, or no symptoms at all in some cases. If you have new or multiple partners, or notice unusual symptoms; testing is important as many infections can be asymptomatic.

Post-antibiotic changes

Antibiotics can unintentionally affect beneficial bacteria, potentially reducing *Lactobacillus* dominance. Symptoms include temporary changes in discharge or odour.

Note: Many conditions with similar symptoms exist. A proper diagnosis often requires clinical evaluation and if appropriate, laboratory testing.

Practical tips to support a healthy balance through lifestyle and products

Choose gentle, pH-appropriate products

For healthy balance use unscented soaps, avoid douches and minimise harsh cleansers around the vulva. Also try to avoid highly perfumed hygiene products that can disrupt the natural balance.

Wear breathable, natural fabrics

Always opt for cotton underwear if you can and avoid tight-fitting, non-breathable underwear for extended periods. Be sure to change out of wet swimwear or workout gear promptly to reduce moisture buildup.

Practice smart personal care habits

Pat the area dry after bathing rather than rubbing and remember to wipe from front to back to reduce bacterial transfer.

Mind your antibiotics and medications

Only use antibiotics when prescribed and discuss potential impacts on the vaginal microbiome with your healthcare provider. If you've recently taken antibiotics and notice changes, talk to a clinician about management options.

Support the microbiome with informed choices

Some studies suggest certain Lactobacillus-containing probiotics may help restore balance after antibiotics, but evidence varies. Discuss use with a healthcare provider, especially if you're pregnant, breastfeeding or have underlying health conditions.

A balanced diet with a variety of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and fermented foods can support overall health. Hydration and regular exercise are also beneficial.

Healthy sexual practices

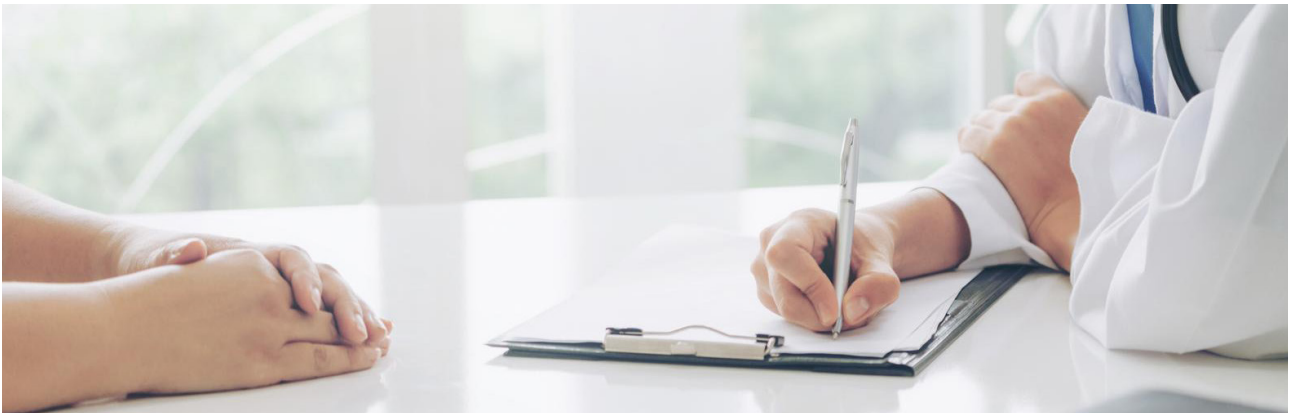
Use protection to reduce STI risk and consider discussing recent sexual history with your partner(s). Maintain good hygiene without over-washing, as excessive cleansing can irritate the mucosa.

Monitor and record changes

If you notice persistent changes in discharge, odour, itching, irritation or discomfort, keep a simple record of symptoms, onset and potential triggers to share with your healthcare provider.

Vaginal microbiome and the menopause

During menopause, declining oestrogen levels can thin the vaginal lining and reduce moisture, which can alter the balance of bacteria. This often leads to decreased Lactobacillus dominance, higher pH levels, and symptoms such as vaginal dryness, irritation, discomfort during sex, burning or painful urination, and in some cases a weakened pelvic floor. The practical tips below give details on how you can manage symptoms but if they are severe we recommend speaking to your GP or gynaecologist for a diagnosis to rule out other causes.



When to seek medical advice

We recommend speaking to your GP or healthcare provider if symptoms are new, persistent, or severe, such as:

- Unusual discharge with a strong odour, colour changes, or presence of blood
- Itching, burning or irritation that doesn't improve with basic care
- Pain during urination or intercourse
- Pelvic or abdominal pain
- Recurrent episodes (e.g. multiple BV or yeast infections within a year)

If you are pregnant, have a weakened immune system, are undergoing fertility treatments, or have other chronic health conditions, consult a healthcare professional promptly if you notice any concerning changes.

If you're unsure whether symptoms require medical evaluation, contact a clinician or a sexual health clinic for guidance. They can perform appropriate tests to identify infections (e.g. BV, yeast infections, STIs) and recommend evidence-based treatments.

FAQs

Is a healthy vaginal microbiome the same for everyone?

Not exactly. While many people have Lactobacillus-dominated communities, the exact species and balance vary between individuals and can change over time due to hormones, age, medications and lifestyle.

Can I test my vaginal microbiome at home?

There are at-home testing options, but results should be interpreted with a healthcare professional. Home tests may not capture the full clinical picture.

Do vaginal probiotics work?

Some people benefit from specific probiotic strains, especially after antibiotics. However, evidence is mixed, and products vary widely. Speak with a clinician to determine appropriateness and strain selection.

Does douching affect the vaginal microbiome?

Yes. Douching disrupts the natural balance and is generally not recommended unless advised by a healthcare provider for a specific condition.

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The Lancashire Gynaecologist

Mr Eric Mutema is a highly experienced and respected Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist. He founded his private practice, the Lancashire Gynaecologist, to provide a service to women in Lancashire and beyond and respond to the shortage of specialist gynaecological services available to women missing out on individualised care and treatment. The Lancashire Gynaecologist offers patients individual attention, an empathetic, compassionate approach and patient-centred care. His patients will receive a full consultation that takes their overall health into account and subsequent treatments will be tailored to meet the needs of the individual woman. So please don't wait and put off seeking treatment; we're available, convenient and we can help you.



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