

Genital Itch in Women

WHAT IS IT AND IS IT IMPORTANT?

Itch is the feeling on the skin that makes you want to scratch. Genital itch in women relates to itching in the female genital area. It is a common problem, but there are effective treatments available. Women occasionally itch. This is normal. It is important to find the cause of an itch that persists or interferes with daily living so that you can be given the right treatment.

WHAT DO I SEE?

Sometimes there may be nothing to see, but changes may occur depending on the cause. The skin color may be altered to red, white or brown. The surface may be dry and scaly, or wet and weeping. The texture may change as the skin thickens.

This can be due to prolonged rubbing and scratching, an underlying skin condition, or both. As it becomes thicker, it itches more and so an 'itch-scratch cycle' is set up. Although you may be able to stop yourself scratching in the day, you can also scratch when you are asleep. Continuous scratching may tear the skin and lead to slight bleeding, a burning sensation or soreness.

HOW DO I FIND THE CAUSE?

It is important to see your healthcare provider so that the cause of your symptoms can be worked out and then you can be given the right treatment. Your healthcare provider will examine you and can often tell what is wrong by simply looking at the skin. If an infection is suspected, this can be confirmed by a swab (culture) or a skin scraping (for fungal infection). For some of the less common skin problems, a biopsy may be needed. This is a simple procedure that can usually be done, under local anesthetic, in your healthcare provider's office. A tiny piece of skin is removed so that it can be looked at under the microscope to confirm the diagnosis.

CAUSES:

Most women assume that all genital itching is due to yeast/thrush (Candida) infection. Although itching is a frequent symptom in infections such as yeast/thrush, there are several other causes of genital itching in women:

- **SKIN DISEASE** (e.g. eczema/dermatitis, psoriasis, and other less common skin disorders such as lichen sclerosus)
- **IRRITATION** from sweat, tight clothing or personal hygiene products (soaps, detergents, spermicides)
- **IRRITATION FROM OTHER GENITAL INFECTIONS** that are not yeast

HOW IS IT TREATED?

DO NOT SELF-TREAT.

As with most problems, the treatment depends on the cause. Your health care provider will recommend appropriate treatment. You should follow his/her advice and finish the course of treatment. If symptoms persist, go back to your health care provider. For example, if you have eczema, mild steroid creams or ointments are used but you may need stronger steroid preparations for different types of skin problems. These are quite safe to use, but should be monitored by your health care provider. In some skin conditions that cause itching, treatment may be required intermittently. Your health care provider can advise you about a maintenance plan.

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WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MYSELF?

Most women assume that all genital itching is due to yeast/thrush (Candida) infection. Although itching is a frequent symptom in infections such as yeast/thrush, there are several other causes of genital itching in women:

- Stop any creams that you are using (including those you have bought over the counter) and see your healthcare provider
- Avoid tight clothing
- Wear cotton underwear as synthetic clothing clings and increases heat and sweating and avoid pantyhose
- Avoid excessive washing, as this will remove the protective natural oils on the vulvar skin and will dry and irritate the skin (Itching is not due to lack of hygiene. Using plain water is the more gentle way to wash the vulva. If a cleanser must be used then try a mild hypoallergenic scent-free product instead of a scented soap, gel or cream cleanser.)
- If the area is dry and irritated use a thin film of plain petrolatum (vasoline) to seal in moisture and coat and protect the skin, while awaiting advice from your healthcare provider
- Avoid feminine hygiene sprays and other perfumed products
- Use mild unscented hypoallergenic laundry detergents to wash your underwear
- Use 'all cotton' sanitary pads or tampons when required
- Do not get too hot at night with heavy blankets or duvets, as itching will be made worse by warmth, and avoid wearing underwear at night that may make you warmer
- AVOID vaginal creams that contain benzocaine, which can cause inflammation

These measures are often useful to stop the problem from coming back.

You may feel itchy at times. This may be worse at a particular time of the day, usually at night, and many women wake themselves scratching. Many women cannot help scratching. The itch-scratch response is normal but scratching the genital area is potentially harmful as it can damage the skin and keep symptoms going for quite some time.

There may only be two strategies we can use to help the itch. **First**, the condition needs to be managed properly (this is a shared job between you and your doctor). **The second** is distraction which is something only you can do. For example, if the itch is unbearable in bed, don't lie there feeling uncomfortable and unable to resist scratching. Instead, get up, find something to do which occupies your hands and your concentration. When you feel the tension from the itch is reduced, then try to go back to bed. Hopefully there will only be a short time before you begin to feel better.

A first generation antihistamine such as hydroxyzine or diphenhydramine taken at bedtime will help to control itching. It is best to keep your nails filed down so that scratching in your sleep will not cause too much damage.

