Understanding and Preventing Vaginitis

One of the most common reasons a woman visits the gynecologist is for the evaluation and treatment of vaginitis. Vaginitis is inflammation of the vagina. It is usually the body’s response to an overgrowth of bacteria or fungus (yeast) in the vagina. Less common causes of vaginitis include an allergic reaction, estrogen deficiency, or retained foreign object to name a few.

It is normal for a woman to experience periodic secretions from the vagina and the cervix (mouth of the womb or uterus) as she moves through her cycle. Her body is responding to the rise and fall of her hormones each month. Vaginal wall cells and cervical mucus are being released. Bacteria and yeast are normally present in the vagina, as they are in the large intestines. Infection occurs when the vaginal environment gets thrown out of balance or organisms not usually found there are introduced. For our purposes, we will focus on prevention of bacterial and yeast vaginal infections.

Vaginitis may present as increased vaginal discharge, itching, irritation, and/or odor. We can decrease our risk of developing vaginitis by engaging in behaviors that help our bodies’ to protect us from infection and avoiding those that prevent it from doing so. Proper nutrition, clothing, maintenance of the vagina’s acidic environment, stress management, and the healing of emotional wounds are the cornerstones of vaginitis prevention.

Our bodies need whole foods to function optimally. We need plenty of fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and protein (i.e. seeds, nuts, legumes, fish, or lean meat). Decreasing or avoiding sugar and refined carbohydrates (which promptly break down into sugar) are crucial to decreasing inflammation throughout your body, not just in the vagina. White bread, white rice, white potatoes, chips, cookies, cakes, crackers, sodas, juices, and sweet tea are examples of refined carbohydrates. Sugar causes yeast overgrowth and prevents your immune system from protecting you. A teaspoon of sugar can paralyze white blood cells, your immune system’s soldiers, for six hours! No one is saying cut all the goodies from your diet. However, a good portion of women suffering from recurrent vaginal infections, are indulging in sugar and refined carbohydrates throughout the day. A good multivitamin is also recommended to supplement our diet. Some women may want to consider supplementing with Lactobacillus acidophilus, a probiotic, as well. This organism, normally found in the vagina, secretes acid, protecting the vagina from bacterial overgrowth. Consumerlab.com is a good place to start your search for a reputable multivitamin and probiotic.

While it is important what we put in our bodies, it is also important what we put on them as well. Fabrics that allow our skin to breathe, like cotton, are best for underwear. Going without underwear at bedtime is also good. Nylon, polyester, Spandex, Lycra, etc. do not allow air to circulate and hold moisture against our skin. Wear these fabrics on special occasions. Thongs, though sexy to many, do not appear to be designed for daily wear. Some women have developed more infections and breakdown of their skin as a result of wearing thongs in excess. Panty liners do not allow air to circulate as well. They are to be worn during your period, not as daily wear. They too, can break your skin down when misused. Your underwear will catch what minor vaginal secretions you may have. If you are not comfortable with the amount of secretions, then you may have an infection and need treatment.

Try to minimize the amount of perfumes and dyes in your personal hygiene products. These include toilet paper, soaps, bubble bath, tampons, etc. Currently, the only over the counter pharmaceuticals that can treat vaginitis, are the antifungals or yeast medications. There are none that can treat bacterial infections. Douching is discouraged with one exception. Women in long distance relationships may have intercourse several times in a short amount of time. As mentioned earlier, the vagina is most healthy in acid environment and resistant to bacterial overgrowth. Semen is alkaline and protects the sperm as they travel to reach the women’s egg safely. It takes the vagina eight hours to return to its baseline acid environment after one act of intercourse. Thus, women prone to infections after having intercourse several times in a short amount of time may find douching with vinegar and water preventative. Outside of this instance, douching is not necessary and may be harmful. The vagina does not need to be washed.
out. Regular douching destroys the vagina’s balance of microorganisms and makes you more prone to infection.

Proper rest and stress management are vital to your body's immune system. Most adults need on average seven hours of sleep at night. Sleep allows your body to repair and replenish. Just as a car cannot run without fuel, your body cannot function without rest for long. Caffeine and stimulants are not a substitute for sleep. Many studies now demonstrate that stress depresses our immune system and prevents its proper functioning. People, who spend a lot of time in negative emotions like sadness, anger, resentment, and hopelessness, tend to get sick more often then those who are happy and optimistic. As long as you are alive on this planet, there will always be stress or unpleasant things happening. The best one can do is to handle the stressors in a healthy way. Everyone should begin their day with some soothing, meditative, grounding practice for 10-15 minutes. Prayer, meditation, reading from a holy book, yoga, journaling, etc. at the start and at the end of your day will go a long way in decreasing your stress levels.

Finally, for those challenged with recurrent vaginitis, it is good to do some self-reflection. Many women can pin point when they began having recurrent infections. It might have been with the birth of a child, a bad break up, loss of a job, or the start of stressful job. Sometimes, we are not aware of the impact that life's events have on the flow of chi or vital force through our bodies. If you continue to be challenged with recurrent infections despite healthy living, there is often an emotional wound that needs healing or a situation in your life that needs to be handled in a different way. You first must figure out what it is, then gather all your strength and courage to do something about it.