

Common misdiagnosis: most women believe they have a yeast infection when they don't

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Most women who think they have a vaginal yeast infection are wrong and may be doing more harm than good in treating their problem, says a Saint Louis University researcher who presented her findings recently.

“Everything that itches isn’t a yeast infection,” said Susan Hoffstetter, Ph.D., assistant professor of obstetrics, gynecology and women’s health at Saint Louis University School of Medicine and a SLUCare women’s health nurse practitioner.

“People keep treating themselves. They buy over-the-counter medicines for yeast infections or they call the doctor to get a prescription for medicine over and over again.”

Nearly three times out of four, they’re treating themselves or calling a doctor for a medicine to treat a problem they don’t have, said Hoffstetter, who co-directs the SLUCare Vulvar and Vaginal Disease Clinic, which specializes in treating women who have chronic pain, unhealthy discharges or skin problems in their vaginal area.

“If you treat yourself and it never goes away, you shouldn’t continue to treat yourself,” Hoffstetter said. “You’re making a situation worse and you can get into cyclic episodes where you think you have a yeast infection all of the time.”

Vaginal yeast infections are common; three out of four women have had one at some point during their lives. Symptoms include pain or

discomfort during sex; burning, redness and swelling of the vaginal area; a thick, white cottage cheese-like discharge that doesn't smell bad; and pain during urination.

Hoffstetter analyzed the records of more than 150 new patients of the SLUCare Vulvar and Vaginal Disease Clinic, a specialty practice that sees women with recurrent vaginitis problems. These women thought they had yeast infections, however only 26 percent actually did.

"Their symptoms didn't correlate with the clinical evidence of a yeast infection," she said.

The women reported itching and a vaginal discharge, which also could indicate an inflammation, dry skin tissues or a sexually transmitted infection. These problems require a different treatment than the anti-fungal medicine given for a yeast infection.

Her advice to women who think they have a yeast infection is to call their doctor or women's health nurse practitioner for an appointment. The physician or nurse practitioner will do a pelvic exam to detect swelling and unhealthy discharge. The health professional also may take a swab to get a specimen for a lab test or to be examined under the microscope to see if yeast is the true culprit.

"Women shouldn't just run to the drugstore if they think they have a yeast infection. The optimal thing would be to be evaluated," Hoffstetter says.

Source: Saint Louis University

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