

The Common thrush...

By the VVF's founder and director, Juliet Gellatley

...and what to do about it

Thrush, that annoying and often embarrassing infection of the vagina, is startlingly common – about 75 per cent of women in their reproductive years have it at some point with a further 10 to 20 per cent carrying it without symptoms.

Almost all cases are caused by *Candida albicans*, a single-celled, yeast-like fungi and while it can live on the skin in small numbers, the conditions it likes best are warm, moist, airless parts of the body, hence the vagina but sometimes the intestines, nose and throat as well. Held in check by a healthy body, *Candida* should be harmless.

Intestines are often the first place colonised but in healthy people, beneficial bacteria such as lactobacilli and bifido offer a first line of defence. The correct pH (acid/alkaline) level is also important in fighting unwanted invaders and so the digestive system is involved as is the immune system – and so it follows that diet is too.

Candida overgrowth in the intestines can reach the anal area and subsequently the vagina, where good bacteria and mucous offer protection. However, these natural defences can be upset by antibiotics, pregnancy, diabetes or by eating sugar-laden, refined food.

In women, the symptoms of vaginal thrush include itching, irritation, discharge, redness, soreness and swelling of the vagina and vulva and sometimes a thick, white vaginal discharge. Less common in men, it can cause irritation.

What promotes thrush?

- Antibiotics
- Junk food diets
- Too much animal protein
- Too many other acid forming foods
- Nutritional deficiencies
- Diabetes
- Pregnancy
- Suppressed immune system (AIDS, chemotherapy, stress)
- Oral contraceptives
- Spermicides
- Excessive use of alcohol or drugs
- Resistant strains of *Candida* due to overuse of anti-yeast drugs
- Tight clothing restricting air movement

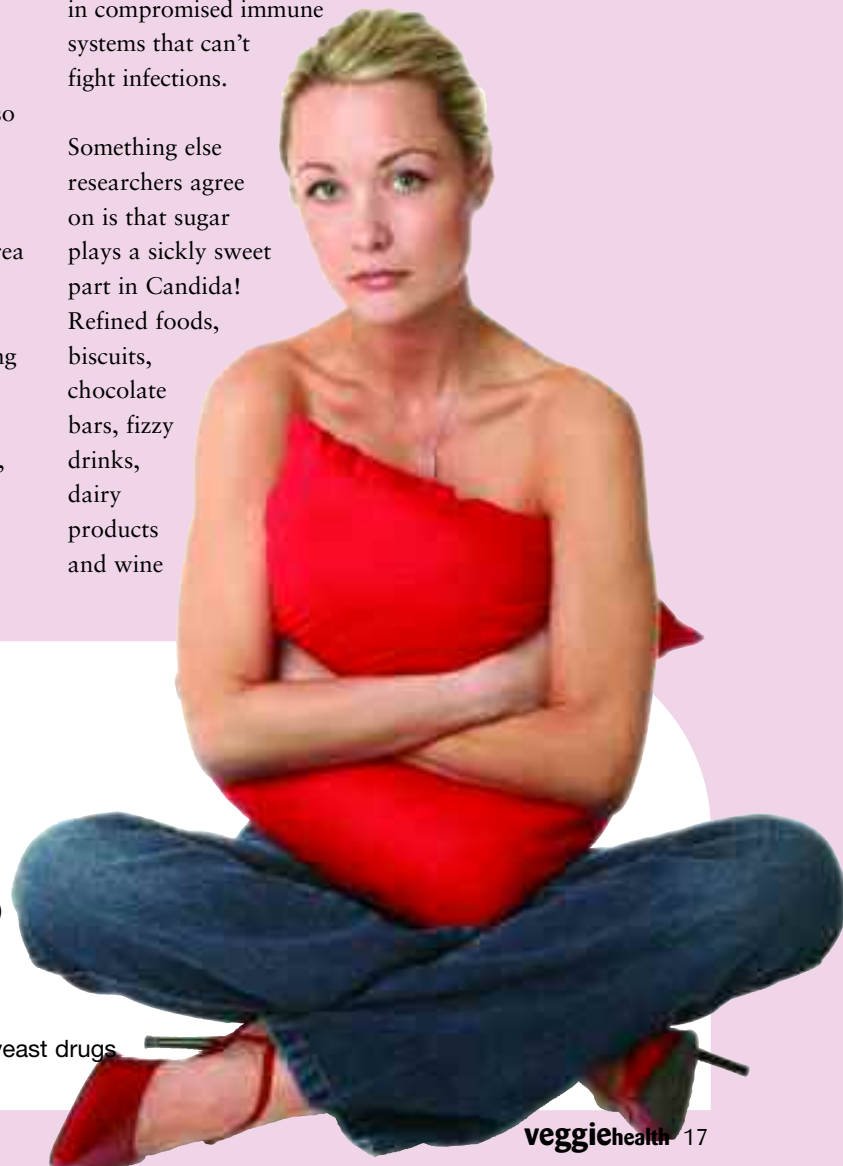
The thrush take-over bid

Opinions differ as to the causes of thrush but there is resounding agreement that antibiotics cause it! Unable to distinguish between good and bad bacteria, they kill both. Repeated courses of antibiotics can create an imbalance between friends and foes and destroy the delicate balance that our health depends upon.

Good bacteria help to maintain the pH level of the large intestine, which deters *Candida* and other invaders. They also deprive *Candida* and other parasites of food, water and oxygen, increase nutrient absorption, lower blood cholesterol and manufacture certain vitamins.

When antibiotics kill good bacteria it's not just in the intestines but the vagina too and it can be the start of a take-over bid. Yet antibiotic prescriptions are often inappropriately handed out in their millions and animals in factory farms are flooded with them. Not surprising, then, that junk diets result in compromised immune systems that can't fight infections.

Something else researchers agree on is that sugar plays a sickly sweet part in *Candida*! Refined foods, biscuits, chocolate bars, fizzy drinks, dairy products and wine



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contribute by increasing sugar in our urine, which feeds the yeast. Similarly, women with diabetes are more likely to get thrush because of their increased blood sugar levels which can get into vaginal secretions and urine.

Pregnancy and oral contraceptives also play havoc with sugar metabolism. Hormone levels change dramatically during pregnancy, which increases sugar in vaginal secretions while the pill can affect a woman's ability to process sugar. Yeast uses the extra sugar to grow.

You're too acidic, babe!

Our bodies are naturally slightly alkaline and if pH veers towards acidity, it allows parasites, including Candida, to thrive in our intestines. Certain foods are acid forming once digested while others are alkaline forming and surprisingly, this has nothing to do with the actual pH of the food itself.

Lemons are very acidic but after digestion the end products are very alkaline while meat, on the other hand, tests as alkaline before digestion but leaves very acidic residues. It is these acidic conditions that may result in recurrent thrush.

Just to confuse you, unlike our bodies the vagina is naturally acid – too acidic for thrush. So, if something upsets its pH level, such as menstruation or washing with soap (which is alkaline) – Candida can thrive. If you do get thrush it's important to stop using soap.

Nutritional deficiencies also play a part. The government's *National Food and Nutrition Survey* found that 80 per cent of British kids are guzzling away on white bread, savoury snacks, biscuits, chips and chocolate confectionery. Roughly 60-75 per cent had not eaten any citrus fruits or leafy green vegetables during the week of the survey. The point is that nutritional deficiencies in both adults and kids are incredibly common and stop our systems from thriving.

Worrying times?

Thrush can reoccur when you are under stress, when the hormone cortisol increases and dampens our immune system, telling cells to go into survival mode. Digestion becomes subdued and undigested food nourishes Candida and other parasites and the good bacteria diminish.

There are many causes of Candida but diet is an important component in both cause and cure. There are many helpful books and our sister vegetarian group, Viva!, sells *Vegetarian Cooking Without* (£10.99) by Barbara Cousins, which has recipes free from dairy, sugar, yeast and gluten. (Call Viva! on 0117 944 1000, Mon-Fri.)

Other Tips to Make Thrush Fly

- Wash the vaginal area with water only
- Change sanitary protection frequently
- Wear cotton underwear and loose-fitting clothes

Foods to Avoid when treating Candida*

- Sugar and foods containing sugar (also sugar substitutes such as Aspartame)
- Yeast (bread, Marmite, pizza bases, etc) and mushrooms
- Meat
- Dairy
- Refined grains (white rice, white flour, breakfast cereals unless whole grain)
- Fermented products (alcohol) and vinegar
- Malted products
- Limit fresh fruit to two pieces a day and avoid fruit juices
- Limit shelled nuts and peanuts because of possible moulds
- Fish
- Tea and coffee

** Note you're an individual and what works for one person may not work for the next. Fruit is hotly debated, with some saying avoid it, others saying limit it and others saying certain fruits should be eaten regularly, especially mangoes, avocados, bananas, apples, pears and papaya; and lemons for drinks and dressings (but not grapes or melons). Most recommend taking probiotics to reintroduce good bacteria into the gut.*

Foods to increase when treating Candida

- Vegetables – especially broccoli, cabbage, brussels sprouts
- Beans and pulses – including sprouted
- Whole grains – especially quinoa, millet, brown rice
- Avocados
- Garlic, onions, ginger, coriander, cayenne, cumin, turmeric
- Linseed oil and virgin olive oil
- Almonds
- Pumpkin, sunflower, sesame seeds
- Soya milk (sugar free)
- Whole grain, yeast-free bread

- Keep dry! Try white or rose clay powders in underwear
 - Create a more acidic vagina (not body!) – lie in a bath with cider vinegar added
 - Douche with 3 parts water to 1 part cider vinegar (ask a chemist for a plastic syringe)* for about a week
 - Cervagyn cream (BioCare) can relieve itching and swelling
- *Read more on this in Gill Jacobs, *Beat Candida Through Diet**

Orthodox treatments are available without a doctor's prescription and the most commonly-used drug is clotrimazole. For recurrent vaginal thrush, fluconazole may be prescribed but single doses can be ordered over the counter. As some Candida are becoming resistant to drugs you need to look at underlying causes in recurrent cases. Always check with a doctor or natural practitioner that you have not misdiagnosed yourself.