

Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)

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Vulvovaginitis

A parent's guide

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Date published: 04/12/2017
Review date: 04/12/2019
Ref: C&YP/Paed/VV/03

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Introduction

Vulvovaginitis is inflammation of the skin around the vulva and vagina area. It is common in girls aged between two to seven years old.

Symptoms

The condition commonly causes discharge and soreness. The discharge can be yellow or green and can be smelly. The skin around the urethra can also be inflamed which can cause soreness when passing urine. The condition does not cause vaginal bleeding.

Causes

The condition is caused by recurrent infections from germs in the gut that are transferred from the anal region. Vulvovaginitis often occurs when a child becomes responsible for her own toilet hygiene which may be less effective at first.

The vaginal skin in young girls is particularly prone to infection because:

- The body does not make oestrogen and this leads to a thinning of the vaginal skin.
- The vagina is very close to the anus.
- The labia (lips of the vagina) are flat and thin.

Tests to identify infection

Your doctor may take a swab (a wipe of the affected area with a cotton bud) and send it to the laboratory for tests. If your child experiences stinging during urination, the doctor will also test the urine.

Treatment

There is no single treatment for the condition and the symptoms can be hard to cure. The following measures should help to improve the symptoms:

- Make sure your daughter's bottom is thoroughly cleaned after she goes to the toilet.
- Always wipe from front to back after urination or opening bowels. Teach your daughter to do this herself.
- Avoid bubble baths and perfumed soaps. Use hypoallergenic soaps (for sensitive skin). Use nonbiological washing powder for underwear.
- Avoid tights and leggings.
- Use cotton nightwear.

- Avoid wearing underwear at night (loose pyjama bottoms or night dresses are best).

A medicated cream such as E45 or Sudocrem can be used if the skin is sore. Cream is best applied at night. Do not apply Canesten cream unless advised to do so by your doctor.

If these do not work, your doctor may suggest a short course of oestrogen cream. This is usually applied at night three times a week for up to a month. The cream can strengthen the skin and help stop soreness and infection. It is not licensed for use on children but is very safe if used in small amounts over a short period. It should not be used long-term.

Can the condition cause long-term problems?

The symptoms of vulvovaginitis will improve as the child reaches puberty, usually from the age of eight. The condition does not cause any long-term problems.