Yeast Infection vs. Bacterial Vaginosis

Different symptoms, Different OTC treatments

Rebecca Hulem, RN, Gyn Nurse Practitioner, Certified Menopause Clinician

Vaginal infections can be so annoying. The symptoms alone are hard to deal with. Not to mention the inconvenience of having to make an appointment with your doctor, take time off from work, experience an embarrassing and often uncomfortable exam, and then be told you need to take medication to resolve the infection. The next stop will be the pharmacy where you find out (if you’re lucky enough to have it) your insurance doesn’t cover the prescription or you haven’t met the required deductible.

There are many different types of vaginal infections but the two most common, by far, are vaginal yeast infection and bacterial vaginosis (often referred to as BV). Most surprising to many women is that BV is twice as common as yeast infection.

Fortunately for women today, over-the-counter (OTC) treatment and symptom relief products, for both yeast infection and bacterial vaginosis, can be found at your nearest pharmacy. Why is this important? Women now have the option of treating the two most common vaginal conditions without going to the doctor. It is very important to keep in mind, however, that OTC treatments are intended only for women who have been previously diagnosed by a doctor and clearly recognize their symptoms when they recur. And, should her symptoms not resolve after OTC treatment, a doctor follow up is in order.

Today’s article will focus on two important topics:

1. What are the symptoms of yeast infection and BV, and how do they differ?
2. When visiting the feminine care section at the nearest pharmacy, which OTC products are most appropriate for yeast infection versus BV?

Yeast Infection: Symptoms and Treatment

Yeast infections have the following symptoms. You may experience all of the symptoms or just a few. They are:

- Vaginal itching (This can occur on the inside of the vagina, outside on the labia or both)
- Vaginal burning (Especially while urinating)
- Redness and swelling of the labia (The inside of the vagina may feel swollen too)
- Vaginal discharge (Usually white, lumpy in texture, similar to cottage cheese)

The standard treatment for yeast infection is an antifungal product to curb the over growth of yeast, restore the vaginal flora to a natural balance, and of course resolve the symptoms. For many years, antifungal products were not available for purchase over the counter. Fortunately today, there are a wide
variety of OTC options at your local drug store, which certainly makes it more convenient to treat the infection. However, which OTC option is best for you? The choices can sometimes be confusing.

For women purchasing OTC vaginal antifungals, I generally recommend avoiding formulations that include alcohol as this can irritate sensitive vaginal tissue already inflamed by the yeast infection. Although these non-alcohol products come in suppository form, it is my experience that the creams are generally more effective and more soothing in the vagina. Creams can also be applied to the outside of the vagina around the labia to reduce itching and swelling.

Many women don’t like having to use a product for more than three days. However, based on my clinical experience, the one to three day treatments may reduce the symptoms in the short term, only to have them return with a vengeance in one to two weeks. I, therefore, recommend using a seven-day treatment.

**Bacterial Vaginosis – Symptoms and Treatment** Although many women with BV are often asymptomatic, when symptoms do occur they are very different from the symptoms of a yeast infection. This fact makes it easier for previously diagnosed women to tell the difference between yeast infection and BV when symptoms recur, as they so often do.

The most common symptoms of bacterial vaginosis are:

- Gray, white, thin vaginal discharge
- Very noticeable vaginal odor (Many women describe the odor as a “fishy smell.” This odor is frequently most noticeable after sexual intercourse or before and after a menstrual period.)
- Elevated Vaginal pH (Use a home test or visit your doctor to measure your pH balance. If it’s 4.8 or higher, you might have BV. In contrast, a yeast infection is not associated with an elevated pH.)

Because bacterial vaginosis is caused from an over growth of certain bacteria in the vagina, antibiotics orally or in a vaginal cream or gel, are the standard treatment used to resolve the infection. These antibiotics are prescription only and must, therefore, be written by a doctor.

Unfortunately BV is a highly recurrent situation requiring many women to take frequent, multiple doses of antibiotics, often with uncomfortable side effects. Needless to say, this cycle can cause frustration and distress, leading to emotional and psychological effects in women who suffer recurrent BV.

**OTC Relief**

Fortunately today there is an OTC option for relief of recurrent BV symptoms and it can be purchased under the **vH essentials** line of female health products. The **vH essentials Homeopathic BV Treatment** is indicated for relief of the most bothersome symptoms of BV (odor and discharge) and is ideal for women who’ve been previously diagnosed with BV and recognize their symptoms; are interested in natural, alternative treatments; and prefer self-management of their recurring vaginal symptoms when possible.
The Homeopathic BV Treatment includes six vaginal inserts that don’t melt and leak like other messy vaginal treatments, and they are only as far away as the store around the corner. To learn more about this product, and others that support vaginal health to reduce frequency of common vaginal imbalances, visit the vH essentials website at: www.vhessentials.com.

Clearly, vaginal yeast infection and BV have very different symptoms that, in my experience, are readily discernible by women who’ve had both. The good news is the variety of OTC treatment options now available to women to help them avoid, in many cases, costly and time-consuming visits to the doctor. However always remember, if you are not sure what kind of infection you have or if you have tried over the counter products and your symptoms have not resolved, a visit to your doctor is the next step.

About the Author
Rebecca Hulem has excelled in the field of women's health for over thirty years. Her career has included positions as a registered nurse, Ob/Gyn nurse practitioner, certified menopause clinician, and certified nurse midwife. Currently Rebecca is an active speaker, consultant, and author on matters related to women’s health. With a reputation as a caring, nurturing and informed woman who is truly passionate about helping other women find answers to their health issues, Rebecca has truly connected with her core audience.

Disclosure Statement
Rebecca Hulem is a medical consultant to Lake Consumer Products.

Article Content
The information contained in this article is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace a physician's diagnosis or advice and should not be construed as individual medical advice.