Let's Talk About...

Genital redness, irritation, and vaginal discharge

What is genital redness and irritation?

Genital redness and irritation are on the visible, outside parts of the genitals. Most parents see redness of the labia or external genital area and think this is the vagina. The vagina is inside, not outside. Redness and irritation of the genital area is common and often confused with vaginitis or vaginal discharge, but they are not the same. Genital irritation can be from poor hygiene, poor wiping after going to the bathroom, not changing dirty underwear, urine leaking all the time, using bubble bath or other perfumed products, including perfumed soaps.

How is genital irritation redness diagnosed?

At first the pediatrician may ask about products your child uses or poor hygiene habits. Then the doctor will examine your child to see if there is redness or irritation. The treatment may be to have good habits for a week or two and avoiding products that irritate. If the problem does not go away, the pediatrician may do more tests. Often, a young girl with vaginal discharge needs to have a culture to find out what the vaginal discharge is from. The pediatrician will do a little swab of the vagina, something like swabbing the throat for strep.

How is genital irritation redness treated?

Genital irritation redness is most often treated with the methods in the section "What should I do at home" on the next page. If your child has been taking antibiotics or is diabetic, the doctor may try anti-yeast medicine. Your child's doctor may suggest a bland ointment like Vaseline, A and D, or Desitin® to relieve and protect irritated skin. Do not use steroid creams on the genital area before talking to a doctor. Do not use antibiotics for genital redness or irritation. If the doctor takes a culture of the area and finds your child has vaginal discharge or vaginitis, your doctor can prescribe the right antibiotic.

How can genital irritation be prevented?

Genital irritation can be prevented with good hygiene, avoiding products like bubble baths, perfumed soaps, and fabric softeners.

What is vaginitis/vaginal discharge?

In vaginitis or vaginal discharge, there is foul smelling or discolored draining coming from the vagina.

What are the symptoms of vaginitis/ vaginal discharge?

Some mothers may notice some discoloration on the underwear. This may or may not be vaginal discharge. It could be urine mixed with skin bacteria. The vagina of a prepubertal girl is not easy to see by just looking at the genitals.

What causes vaginal discharge?

The most common of vaginal discharge causes are the same bacteria and viruses that cause respiratory (throat and lungs) infections. Any bacteria or virus that causes a sore throat can cause a vaginal discharge. The most common bacteria is strep. This is the same thing that causes strep throat. Young girls can put small objects in their vaginas without causing any damage on the outside. But these small objects can cause significant vaginal discharge. Yeast infections after toilet training and before puberty are unusual unless the child is diabetic or has just been on antibiotics. Most vaginal discharges are not sexually transmitted infections. Sexually transmitted diseases are rare in children, even children who are sexually abused. But, it is proper for a doctor to ask

about sexual abuse when a young girl comes to their office with a vaginal discharge.

What should I do at home?

- Have your child bathe in plain warm water. Don't put anything in the water. Don't use soaps, perfumes, bubble baths, or vinegar. Don't use baking soda, Aveeno®, or even shampoo.
- Have your child sit backwards on the toilet when she pees. This way she will keep her legs apart and the urine will not flow backwards into the vagina. Encourage her to give a final push after peeing to get all the urine out.
- When wiping the genitals, wipe only from front to back.
- Have your child change her underwear every day. Dress her in cotton underwear. Avoid tight fitting clothes.
- Don't use soaps or other products to wash genitals. Any product with perfume or dye can be very irritating.
- Don't use fabric softener on clothes. You might even rinse the clothes twice, instead of once.

What if I have more questions?

Call your pediatrician. Your pediatrician may answer your questions, or refer you to a specialist who may have more experience in this area.

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