

Genital redness, irritation, and vaginal discharge

There are two types of conditions that can affect a girl's genitals: genital redness and irritation, and vaginitis also known as vaginal discharge. Parents often confuse genital redness and irritation with vaginal discharge and vaginitis, but they are not the same.

What is genital redness and irritation?

Genital redness and irritation occur on the visible, outside parts of the genitals. The labia and surrounding area can become sore and itchy.

What causes genital redness and irritation?

Genital irritation can be caused by:

- Poor hygiene
- Not wiping well after using the toilet
- Not changing dirty underwear
- Leaking urine frequently in underwear
- Using bubble bath or perfumed soaps

How is genital redness and irritation diagnosed?

Your child's healthcare provider may ask about products your child uses or their hygiene habits. Then they will look at your child to see if they have genital redness or irritation. The provider may ask your child to wash and wipe well for a week or two. Your child should also avoid products that irritate the genitals.

If the problem does not go away, the healthcare provider may do more tests. They may swab your child's vagina to see what is causing the problem.

How is genital redness and irritation treated?

To treat genital redness and irritation, your child's healthcare provider may suggest:

- Anti-yeast medicine (if your child is taking antibiotics or is diabetic)
- Petroleum jelly or gentle diaper rash ointments
- Avoiding antibiotics and steroid creams on the genital area
- Bathing without fragranced soap (read the section about treating irritation at home)

If the healthcare provider takes a culture of the genital area and finds your child has vaginal discharge or vaginitis, they can prescribe the right antibiotic.



How can I prevent genital irritation?

Help your child prevent genital irritation by practicing good hygiene and avoiding bubble bath, perfumed soap, and fabric softener.

What is vaginitis/vaginal discharge?

In vaginitis or vaginal discharge, there is foul-smelling or discolored fluid coming from the vagina. Vaginitis is often confused with genital irritation. However, the vagina is inside the body; the labia are outside. Yeast infections are a type of vaginitis. However, they are unusual before puberty unless your child is diabetic or has been taking antibiotics.

If your child has vaginitis, you may notice some discoloration in her underwear. She may also complain of vaginal itching or pain when she pees.

What causes vaginitis?

Vaginitis is usually caused by bacteria called strep. This also causes strep throat and other respiratory infections. Most vaginitis is not caused by sexually transmitted infections. Sexually transmitted diseases are rare in children, even children who are sexually abused. However, your child’s healthcare provider may ask about sexual abuse when a young girl comes to their office with vaginal discharge.

How is vaginitis treated?

Your child’s healthcare provider may prescribe an antibiotic to treat vaginitis. They may also suggest the tips below.

How do I help my child treat genital irritation or vaginitis at home?

- Have your child bathe only in warm water without soap, perfume, bubble bath, or even shampoo.
- Have your child sit backward on the toilet when she pees. She will keep her legs apart, and the urine will not flow back into the vagina. Encourage her to give a final push after peeing to get all the urine out.
- Teach your child to only wipe her genitals from front to back.
- Have your child change her underwear every day. Dress her in cotton underwear, and avoid tight-fitting underwear and clothes.
- Don’t use soaps or other products to wash genitals. Any product with perfume or dye can be irritating.
- Don’t use fabric softener on clothes. You may want to rinse the clothes twice to get rid of scents or chemicals.

Notes