A guide to Vaginal discharge

You can order more copies of this leaflet free of charge from www.healthpromotion.ie
What is vaginal discharge?
Discharge from the vagina is common and often normal in women. Sometimes this is called a ‘physiological discharge’. Physiological discharge contains cleansing bacteria (called lactobacilli) which help to prevent some infections.

An abnormal vaginal discharge can also be caused by infections, some of which may or may not be associated with sex.

What are the possible causes of vaginal discharge?
The most common causes of an abnormal vaginal discharge are thrush and bacterial vaginosis (BV).

There are a number of other possible causes of vaginal discharge:
- Sexually-transmitted infections (STIs), such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea, *Trichomonas vaginalis* and genital herpes
- Non-infectious causes: physiological, cervical ectropion and cervical polyps, malignancy, a foreign body (example: a retained tampon or condom), dermatitis and an allergic reaction.

What symptoms do the different causes of vaginal discharge lead to?
A “physiological discharge” is usually white or clear, not smelly, and can vary with your menstrual cycle.

This is not the same as bacterial vaginosis (see bacterial vaginosis leaflet), which typically has a discharge that is grey, pale and thin. It can have a ‘fishy’ smell which can be worse after sex.

Thrush typically has a white, thick discharge and often causes itch and irritation in the vulva and vagina. This doesn’t have an offensive smell. See thrush leaflet.

Discharge caused by sexually-transmitted infections can range anywhere between a light discharge to a heavy discharge containing pus.

How can I be tested?
Your doctor or nurse will ask you some questions, examine you and do some tests to find out what is causing your vaginal discharge.

If you are sexually active, you will probably be tested for a sexually-transmitted infection.

How is vaginal discharge treated?
Treatment will depend on the cause of the vaginal discharge. This can range from a cream or pessaries (vaginal tablets), to a course of antibiotics. Your doctor or nurse will explain the treatment to you.

Sometimes no treatment is needed because the discharge is normal.

For further information, see leaflets on Thrush and BV.