

What is thrush?

Candidiasis is a common opportunistic infection in people with HIV. It is an infection caused by a common type of yeast (or fungus) called candida. This yeast is found in most people's body. A healthy immune system keeps it under control. Candida usually infects the mouth, throat or vagina. It can occur months or years before other, more serious opportunistic infections.

In the mouth, the infection is called oral candidiasis or thrush. When the infection spreads deeper into the throat it is called esophagitis. It looks like white patches similar to cottage cheese, or red spots. It can cause a painful throat, difficulty swallowing, nausea and loss of appetite.

In the vagina, the infection is called vaginitis, a common vaginal infection. Symptoms include itching, burning and a thick whitish discharge.

Candida can also spread and cause infection in the brain, heart, joints, and eyes.

Can it be prevented?

There is no way to prevent exposure to candida. Medications are not normally used to prevent candidiasis. There are several reasons for this:

- It is not very dangerous
- There are effective drugs to treat it
- The yeast could develop resistance to the medications.

Strengthening your system by taking an antiretroviral drug combination that stops HIV replication is the best way to prevent an outbreak of candidiasis.

How is it treated?

Bacteria found in the body are kept in balance by a healthy immune system. These bacteria are also essential to keep candida in balance in our system. Some antibiotics kill these helpful bacteria and may cause an outbreak of candidiasis. Treating candidiasis will not get rid of the yeast, but will keep it under control.

Treatments can be local or systemic. Local treatments are applied where the infection is found. Systemic treatments affect the whole body. Many health care providers prefer to use local treatment first. It puts the medication directly where it is needed and has fewer side effects than a systemic treatment. Moreover, there is less risk of candida becoming resistant to the medications. The medications used to fight candida are antifungal drugs. Their names end in "-azole." They include clotrimazole, nystatin, fluconazole, and itraconazole.

Local treatments include:

- Creams
- suppositories to treat vaginitis
- liquids
- "troches" or "lozenges" that dissolve in the mouth.

Local treatment may cause some stinging or irritation. Systemic treatment is needed if local treatment doesn't work or if the infection has spread into the throat (esophagitis) or other parts of the body. Some systemic drugs are taken in pill form. The most common side effects are nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain. Less than 20% of people have these side effects.

Candidiasis can come back repeatedly. Some health care providers prescribe anti-fungal drugs on a long-term basis. This can cause resistance. The yeast can mutate so that a drug no longer works.

Natural therapies

Several non-drug therapies seem to help. Although they have not been carefully studied to prove that they work, they can be used as a complement to conventional therapies.

- Reduce the amount of sugar you eat.
- Take garlic supplements or eat raw garlic. Garlic has anti-fungal and anti-bacterial properties. However, it can interfere with the blood levels of some anti-HIV drugs. Garlic supplements or an intake of large amounts of garlic in a person's diet can cause problems for people taking protease inhibitors.
- Eat yoghurt with lactobacillus (acidophilus). It may help to take it after taking antibiotics.
- Take supplements of gamma-linoleic acid (an essential T-cell regulator) and Biotin (vitamin B). They both seem to slow the spread of candida. GLA is found in several cold-pressed virgin oils.

It is important that your doctor knows all the medications you are taking or are considering to take, including vitamin supplements, herbal remedies or homeopathic preparations.

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