

Holly Lynn Padove

California College of Ayurveda

July 2003

AYURVEDIC PERSPECTIVE AND TREATMENT OF VAGINAL YEAST INFECTIONS

Yeast infections, vaginal yeast infections in particular can be a chronic and stubborn form of candida that not only affects the reproductive system, but also can become systemic if not treated properly.

The yeast problem ...occurs at two levels – the localized infections, of which skin rashes and vaginitis are the most common, and the secondary and more serious and wide-ranging systemic reactions from ringworm and jock itch to headache and fatigue to mental symptoms such as mood swings and premenstrual syndrome. Yeast usually remains localized; however, with long-term infestation or with the weakened immune state that can result from a reduction of normal colon bacteria, the yeast can shift into its fungal more invasive form, wherein it develops rhizoids, or roots that can be implanted in the intestinal wall or other mucosal linings.¹

For the purpose of this paper, we will look at yeast infections localized in the vagina. “The common yeast, *Candida Albicans*, thrives in a dark, warm environment, and the vagina serves as an ideal place for this yeast to live and multiply.”² While traditional Western medicine typically treats it allopathically with drugs, Ayurveda considers other influencing factors such as diet and

¹ HealthWorld Online – Nutritional Programs – Nutritional Program for Yeast Syndrome (web based article)

² Crook, William G, *The Yeast Connection Handbook*, Professional Books Inc.2002, p.61

lifestyle, looking at lifestyle, diet and an herbal approach to treatment. In this paper I will explore the Ayurvedic viewpoint and treatment of vaginal yeast infections, and briefly touch upon other alternative approaches.

Before looking at the Ayurvedic approach, the paragraph below, excerpted from a recent Medline article, gives a basic overview on candida that is applicable to the Ayurvedic perspective as well.

Fungi, which along with plants and animals comprise a distinct group in the classification of living things, break down and recycle organic matter. One sub-group with over 600 varieties consists of microscopic, single-celled yeasts. Of the genus *Candida*, the species *Candida Albicans* accounts for 94% of all cases of fungal vaginitis. Yeasts thrive in human bodies as either beneficial or pathogenic agents. Even when they are an innocuous presence in a healthy human body, they are always poised to create opportunistic infections in susceptible individuals. *Candida* has been known to infect every organ of the body, but its ability to cause infection depends upon the presence of a sufficient amount of fungal organisms or generally reduced resistance or both. Often use of modern medical drugs such as oral contraceptives, antibiotics, or immunosuppressant drugs can trigger an infection. The symptoms of vaginal infection are vaginal itching, inflammation, and swelling; a burning sensation; and a white, cheesy discharge. Yeast infections can occur in females of all ages (although they are most common in women of childbearing age) and prompt a large percentage of trips to the gynecologist. Recurrence is common, and each occurrence is harder to eradicate. Often frustrated women turn to alternative therapies. Successful treatment depends upon reducing the yeast population in the body,

building up the beneficial bacteria population, limiting and controlling yeast triggers, and strengthening overall health.³

Another consideration is diabetes. “Diabetes and abnormal glucose tolerance or insulin resistance are major risk factors for recurrent yeast infection.”⁴

Classical Ayurvedic Perspective

From a classical Ayurvedic perspective the main cause of diseases of the vagina “arise because of consuming bad food, according to the the Astanga Hrdayam.⁵ It also states, “Kapha getting aggravated by use of foods which increase moisture leads to slaismiki (kaphaja yoni vycopat) characterized by absence of pain, feeling of cold, itching and discharge of pale, slimy blood. It continues on to say that not cleaning the vagina gives rise to growth of bacteria and itching. (p. 315). In addition, other faulty practices, particularly sexual, can contribute.

Classical Treatments

According to the Astanga Hrdayam vata is the dosha considered most at fault in disorders of the vagina. Vata should be treated, as without the aggravation of vata, the vagina does not get disordered. In diseases of the vagina of vata origin, oleation, sudation, enema and such other therapies, which mitigate vata are highly valuable. While vata should always be considered in treatment of female reproductive disorders, as the Astanga Hrdayam stated as noted above, a vaginal yeast infection can also be consider kapha yoni vyapat, and should also be considered in treatment. “In diseases of vagina vitiated by balasa (kapha), all the treatments should be with

³ Medline: Afr Women Health. 1994 Jul-Sep;2(3):5-8.)

⁴ Jelovesk, Frederick, Women’s Diagnostic Cyber (web based article)

⁵ Murthy, K.R. Srikanatha; ASTANGA HRDAYAM, Volume 3, Krishnadas Academy 2000, page 310

drugs which are dry and hot (in potency.)⁶ According to the Clinical Ayurvedic Medicine Textbook's section on the female reproduction system regarding Kapha Yoni Vyapat, Kapha in the artavavaha srota is treated with hot, dry herbs such as chitrak and the formula trikatu. Kapha should also be treated throughout the rest of the body. Herbs that are particularly useful are palasa, pippili, amalaki, and dadima.⁷

Modern Ayurvedic Perspective

According to Ayurvedic Healing for Women, the vagina normally has an acidic quality, and when it is disrupted, bacteria and fungi can propagate rapidly. Discharges may be accompanied by itching and burning around the opening of the vagina. This can be caused by tiredness, imbalance in the intestinal tract, excessive intercourse, improper hygiene, or the use of personal hygiene products that contain perfumes or chemicals. Antibiotics are also a major cause of yeast infections. Some contraceptive pills have been known to cause leukorrhea as well. Synthetic underwear and nylons can also imbalance the internal milieu of the vagina. A poor diet, high in sugar, coffee, or alcohol can also contribute to vaginal imbalance.⁸ The book goes on to state that this is primarily a kapha disorder that involves the rasa and artavavaha srotas, but can also include pitta and vata.

Doshic Influences⁹-- Pitta/vata types are more prone to infections and irritations in the vagina than other doshas, while kapha/pitta types in particular have a tendency towards yeast infections. The book also goes on to state (p. 120) that any abnormal discharge is called

⁶ Murthy, K.R. Srikanatha; ASTANGA HRDAYAM, Krishnadas Academy, Volume 3, page 324

⁷ Halpern, Marc; Clinical Ayurvedic Medicine; Student's Textbook, Part 2 California College of Ayurveda, 2002, p. 5-21

⁸ Atreya, Ayurvedic Healing for Women, Samuel Weiser, Inc, 1999, page 120

⁹ Atreya, Ayurvedic Healing for Women, Samuel Weiser, Inc, 1999, page 10

leukorrhea, which includes yeast infections, mostly a kapha disorder, but can include the other two doshas as well. Chronic vaginal yeast infections are likely caused by high kapha and low agni, and need to be addressed by treating the digestive system and changing the diet. “The main focus should be on the state of agni in chronic cases.” (p. 121)

Said Dr. Halpern in *Clinical Ayurvedic Medicine Textbook* (p. 5-54), “Yeast infections, while typically kapha in presentation, may also occur in patients with a vata or pitta constitution, hence the condition is often dual doshic of vata/kapha or pitta/kapha nature.”

The Ayurvedic method addresses the underlying imbalances which lead to the development of chronic fungal infections, which usually center on digestion. Imbalances include low agni, overeating, and excess fermented foods and leftovers in the diet. The colon and other gastro-intestinal organs may need cleansing. “The focus is on reestablishing a healthy balance within the body, so that it can begin to eliminate the illness itself.”¹⁰

The Ayurvedic Encyclopedia also substantiates this. It states that yeast usually starts in the GI tract, then moves to the blood and other organs. “Candida is generally caused by weak digestion due to ama. It is usually due to high Vayu or Kapha, but also can be caused by pitta...weak nervous system, worry, fear, grief and anger can also cause candida”¹¹

According to an alternative Western perspective, concurring with the Ayurvedic viewpoint offered by William Crook MD,¹² factors that encourage the growth of vaginal yeast include antibiotics, a weak immune system, overgrowth of yeast in the digestive tract and diet. A

¹⁰ Morningstar, Amadea, *Ayurvedic Cooking for Westerners*, Lotus Press, 1995 page 233

¹¹ Swami Sada Shiva Tirtha, *The Ayurvedic Encyclopedia*, Ayurveda Holistic Center Press, 1998, page 390

¹² Crook, William G, *The Yeast Connection Handbook*, Professional Books Inc.2002, p. 62

number of research studies during the past 10 years showed that diets high in sugar make women much more apt to develop a vaginal yeast infection.

Modern Ayurvedic Treatments

According to Ayurvedic Healing for Women, treatments in chronic cases should focus on the state of agni. Author Atreya suggests a two-week course of acidophilus capsules, along with digestive spices such as cumin, fennel and fenugreek, taken before meals for two weeks.

The goal is to destroy the yeast and boost the immune system, according to the Ayurvedic Dictionary, achieved through restoring digestive and immune strength.

Treatments also include altering **one's diet**. The yeast-free Ayurvedic diet generally used with Candida works to strengthen the digestive tract more specifically. It emphasizes the use of fresh foods, avoidance of yeast, fermented foods and leftovers that are a host to molds. States Amadea Morningstar in Ayurvedic Cooking for Westerners, "The Ayurvedic approach to Candida which I have used in the last several years is quite different in certain respects to the Western Approach. It is entirely vegetarian, and there is no restriction on complex carbohydrates. She went on to say that a Western dietary approach to Candidiasis has been a high-protein, high vegetable, low carbohydrate diet that includes plenty of flesh foods and no sugar.

Candida thrives on bread, cheese, sugar and alcohol (or the conditions these foods create in our guts) so these items are best avoided. The Ayurvedic Dictionary also recommends the avoidance of dairy, sweet fruit, raw foods and cold drinks, which differs slightly from Morningstar's viewpoint.

According to Dr. Lad in the Complete Book of Ayurvedic Home Remedies, yeast infections are a result of a mixed pitta and kapha disorder. It's essential to follow the proper diet,

and not increase pitta or kapha. He states to strictly avoid fermented food and yeast-containing bread. “It is best to follow a diet that is pitta-soothing, but not kapha-provoking.”¹³

Herbal categories should be considered that increase agni, destroy the yeast and increase ojas. Initially, purification herbs should be used, followed by more tonifying herbs that work with ojas, especially if there is ama involved.

Proper management requires that a douche is prepared and applied utilizing purifying herbs such as musta and/or majishta initially. At the same time, the patient should follow a dual doshic diet. When the yeast infection has cleared (kapha has been reduced in the artavavaha srota) then a tonifying douche should be applied. This can be prepared with simple sesame oil for vata and a mix of sesame oil and sunflower oil for pitta. Do not however prepare the oil with tonifying herbs that have a sweet taste as this may cause the condition to reoccur. Apply both the purifying douche and the tonifying douche for 3-5 days each.¹⁴

According to Dr. Vasant Lad, anthelmintic herbs should be used. He says that the concept of krimi, often translated as “worm” includes all parasites, bacterial, fungal and yeast infections. They have value in treating the widespread yeast infection of Candida Albicans. A parasitical infection is treated like ama with a detoxifying therapy, as tonification would only feed the infection.¹⁵

Dr. Lad recommends a douche of mugwort for vaginal yeast infections, as it is anthelmintic. He also recommends prickley ash (VK- P+) as a powerful toxin-destroying herb.

¹³ Lad, Vasant; The complete book of Ayurvedic Home Remedies, Three Rivers Press, 1998, page 269

¹⁴ Halpern, Marc; Clinical Ayurvedic Medicine; Student’s Textbook, Part 2 California College of Ayurveda, p. 5-24

For yeast infections where there is inflammation, it can be combined with bitters such as goldenseal. (p. 137, Yoga of Herbs) Musta can be particularly helpful as it works on the digestive tract, essential to address when dealing with yeast infections. It is one of the most effective herbs for treating female disorders, as it helps destroy parasites such as those of candida. “For women dealing with a great deal of pitta in the reproductive region this is a good herb as it is one of the best digestive stimulants for pitta and an effective stimulant for the liver,” stated Lad on page 179 of Yoga of Herbs.

Dr. Lad also recommends taking $\frac{1}{4}$ t turmeric; $\frac{1}{2}$ t licorice and $\frac{1}{4}$ t shardunika twice a day with warm water until symptoms are gone. He also suggests douching with licorice tea, or triphala tea if there is a thick discharge along with itching and burning.

Herbs recommended in the Ayurvedic Dictionary include; for Vata- anti-fungal herbs such as asafoetida, garlic, ginger, pippali, trikatu, triphala, vidanga and musta. Digestive herbs include cardamom, cumin and ginger, while immune herbs include brahmi, guduchi, bala and yogaraj guggul and saffron. Later, shatavari and ashwaganda are taken (presumably after detoxification has taken place).

For pitta, suggested herbs include vidanga and musta for antifungal and coriander, fennel and turmeric for digestive. Immune herbs include brahmi, guduchi, bala, kaishore guggul, saffron and neem, adding shatavari later.

For Kapha, suggested herbs include vidanga and musta for antifungal and cardamom, ginger asafoetida, trikatu and triphala as digestive herbs. Immune herbs include gokshura, brahmi, guduchi, bala and saffron. Also guggul and neem are used.¹⁶

¹⁵ Lad, Vasant, The Yoga of Herbs; Lotus Press, 1986, p. 179

¹⁶ Swami Sada Shiva Tirtha, The Ayurvedic Encyclopedia, Ayurveda Holistic Center Press, 1998, page 390,391

In his book, *Ayurvedic Healing for Women*, Atreya offers specific formulas for treating yeast infections (p. 121-122) as follows:

Vata: goldenseal, echinacea, barberry, gentian, cardamom, cumin, ginger. To be taken as 2 grams three times a day with warm water and honey, one hour before eating. Take for no longer than ten days or less than six days. He also suggests a douche with goldenseal, turmeric and licorice, or a douche of plain yogurt and acidophilus.

Pitta: goldenseal, echinacea, barberry, turmeric, gentian, cardamom, cumin; three times a day with warm water and honey, one hour before eating. A pitta douche consists of golden seal, gentian and turmeric.

Kapha: goldenseal, echinacea, barberry, black pepper, cardamom, cumin and ginger; 2 grams three times a day with warm water and honey, one hour before eating. He suggests a goldenseal, turmeric, and ginger douche.

Other complementary therapies

Complementary therapies have their value as well, and some of the treatments recommended should be considered as well by those dealing with vaginal yeast infections.

Lactobacillus recolonization (via yogurt or capsules) shows promise for the treatment of both yeast vaginitis and bacterial vaginosis with little potential for harm. Boric acid can be recommended to women with recurrent vulvovaginal candidal infections that are resistant to conventional therapies, but can occasionally cause vaginal burning. ...Finally, tea tree oil and garlic show some in vitro potential for the treatment of vaginitis.¹⁷

¹⁷ Medline - Common complementary and alternative therapies for yeast vaginitis and bacterial vaginosis: a systematic review. Van Kessel K, Assefi N, Marrazzo J, Eckert L. Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology, University of Washington, Harborview Medical Center, Seattle, Washington

According to a recent website article on candida infections, studies have shown that the daily ingestion of 150 ml of yogurt enriched with live *Lactobacillus acidophilus* is associated with an increased colonization of friendly bacteria in the rectum and vagina. This results in reduced episodes of bacterial vaginitis. Yogurt is often used by women with chronic vaginal candida infections.¹⁸ The article also goes on to suggest the use of garlic, biotin and caprylic acid, along with goldenseal and oil from oregano. Pau d'arco, a Brazilian tree bark, is also mentioned.

Conclusion

Vaginal yeast infections can be chronic and stubborn in nature, and if not treated, can possibly spread systemically. The disorder is influenced by a multitude of factors including an imbalanced digestive tract, low agni, ama, low ojas, hygiene, diet, lifestyle factors and past or current use of antibiotics. While primarily a kapha disorder, it can include the other doshas as well, and many times the condition is dual doshic. Treatments include increasing and regulating agni, modifying one's diet to decrease sugars, yeast, and fermented foods, addressing hygiene and lifestyle issues. One should also take herbs appropriate to one's dosha that work with the digestive system, purifying herbs that reduce the yeast in the vaginal tract and immune building herbs increase ojas. Many herbal formulas specific to the doshas were outlined in this paper. Tonifying herbs however, should not comprise a large aspect of treatment until ama is decreased through purifying herbs and other treatments.

As the vaginal yeast infection is complex, it is necessary to understand the general causes and treatments for this disorder, and then tailor a program specific to one's doshic imbalances. This can be accomplished by using the general knowledge available and then focusing in on the unique doshic imbalances and needs of the individual experiencing vaginal yeast infections to come up with a treatment plan.

¹⁸ Life Extension, Candida Infections, Disease Therapy Protocol (<http://www.lef.org/protocols/prtcl-028.shtml>)