

## **The 411 on Kefir and Women's Health**

Women's bodies can be delicate yet strong, simple yet complex, all at the same time. For obvious reasons, we need to deal with a host of different and unique health care needs separate from our male counterparts. While capable of miracles such as childbirth and breastfeeding, we also face major hormonal fluctuations throughout our lifetimes as well as a host of infections which can range from pesky and irritating to life-threatening. Luckily, a number of these issues can be prevented or even treated with natural, whole, probiotic-filled foods...like Kefir!

### **What is a yeast infection?**

First of all, if you suspect you have a yeast infection or are diagnosed with one, do not be embarrassed.

These infections are extremely common - about 75% of women will have one during their lifetime. A small amount of yeast is always in the vagina; this is perfectly normal. But when the yeast overgrows, it can cause an infection. One of the most common culprits behind this kind of overgrowth - Antibiotics. Of course, we all may need these drugs from time to time for help with anything from Strep throat to preventing infection after surgery. But while antibiotics do a good job of wiping out bad bacteria in our systems, they can also wipe out the good bacteria that keep yeast in check.

### **What are the symptoms?**

If you suffer from the following symptoms, you should schedule an appointment with your physician to get tested for a yeast infection:

- Extreme itchiness in and around the vagina.
- Burning, redness, and swelling of the vagina and the vulva.
- Pain when urinating or during intercourse.
- A thick, white, odorless vaginal discharge.

Besides antibiotics, factors such as stress, a lack of sleep, poor eating habits (including eating extreme amounts of sugary foods) and hormonal changes during your periods can make you more prone to these irritating infections.

### **What are the conventional treatments?**

Many doctors will prescribe an antifungal medicine, which may come in cream, tablet or suppository form. He or she may also prescribe a dose of a drug called oral fluconazole.

### **How can kefir help?**

"Kefir is a natural, food-based way to keep the microflora (aka good bacteria) up in the intestines," explains Valerie Early, a Registered Dietitian, Registered Pharmacy Technician and owner of Nutrition, Connection, Balance, LLC ([www.NutritionConnectionBalance.com](http://www.NutritionConnectionBalance.com)) in Schaumburg, IL, which specializes in using medical nutrition therapy to balance hormones and health. "It's better than (the average) dairy product, like your typical yogurt, because the specific strains of acidophilus and lactobacillus really do help promote those good bacteria." When Early's clients are prescribed a course of antibiotic, she will often recommend kefir as a complement to help replenish good bacteria in the lower GI system. "When people have more kefir in their diets or take probiotic supplements or whole food supplements with probiotics in them, I do see a reduction in complaints in vaginal itching, yeast infections and just general immune system issues," she observes.

### **What are some other women's health issues that can benefit from kefir?**

Working on the Labor and Delivery Unit at Prentice Women's Hospital at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, Alyson Lippman, RN, sees her fair share of patients with vaginal health issues. For pregnant women in particular, she says a bacterium called Group B Beta Strep, which lives naturally in the vagina and rectum, can cause trouble during a vaginal delivery. "There is potential for passing it to the baby, where it can be harmful and cause infection," Lippman says. Standard protocol calls for all pregnant women to get tested at 36 weeks gestation; if there is an overgrowth, a woman will receive IV antibiotics during labor. As discussed throughout this article, antibiotics can make a woman prone to yeast infections. Lippman, a new mother herself, took acidophilus capsules throughout her pregnancy in an effort to help keep the Group B Beta Strep in check, reducing the need for IV antibiotics, but she says women can also drink kefir or yogurt ("probably kefir is better because it contains more probiotics," she says) to prevent a Strep overgrowth. (Of note: Lippman says many nurses in her labor and delivery unit drink kefir themselves!) Another pregnancy-related concern pointed out by Lippman: Yeast infections can occur on the breast and be passed back and forth between a mother and her nursing child. "If you're regularly taking in probiotics, that would reduce your risk," of acquiring an infection in the first place.

Looking past the childbearing years, at age 40 and above, many women begin entering a phase in life known as perimenopause, during which vaginal health issues may be more likely to crop up. Because of this, it's particularly important to keep the levels of good bacteria elevated, Early says. To help stave off yeast infections, discharge and general vaginal discomfort, she recommends a cup of kefir a day to clients – she says she likes it more than fortified yogurt because kefir typically contains less sugar. She may also recommend a probiotic supplement.

We love to see men, women and children of all ages enjoying our products, but clearly women can benefit in a number of distinct ways. We hope you enjoy our probiotic-rich kefir – and drink it to your health!

#### ***Sources:***

<http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/vaginal-yeast-infections.cfm>