

Yeast Overgrowth

Yeast (*Candida albicans*) is a micro-organism that normally lives in, or on, moist parts of the body – the mouth, intestinal tract, vagina, diaper area, and between the toes. Though actual yeast dermatitis of the nipple/areolar complex is uncommon, under certain conditions, if yeast overgrowth occurs it can cause discomfort for a breastfeeding mother and her baby.

Pregnancy (due to changes in hormones), antibiotic use (which changes the balance of the types of bacteria in the body), fatigue, poor nutrition, and illnesses (which stress the immune system) **may all encourage an overgrowth of yeast** in, and on, the body.

A diagnosis of yeast overgrowth is usually made based upon symptoms and how the nipples look. It is important to remember that painful and red nipples may be caused by a baby's latch or by a breast pump. Pain from vasospasm (*see our information on **Vasospasm of the Nipple***) is often confused with "yeast overgrowth" because it can also cause burning and/or shooting pain after feedings. One distinguishing factor is that vasospasm usually causes redness of the nipple **ONLY**, whereas the redness caused by yeast overgrowth often spreads past the base of the nipple to the areola – wherever a baby's mouth touches the nipple and breast. In addition, cold often will make vasospasm pain worse.

Possible Symptoms of a Yeast Overgrowth

- **A burning or shooting pain in the nipple or breast** which is usually worst during breastfeeding or pumping. The pain may radiate to the underarm or back.
- **A painful latch** after weeks of pain-free nursing.
- **Nipple redness**, usually extending to the areola. Sometimes there are shallow cracks and/or peeling of the skin.
- **White patches in a baby's mouth, known as thrush.** The patches may look like a thick coating of milk, but they do not wipe or rinse off. Thrush is usually present inside the lips and on the inside of the cheeks.
- **A baby may have a bright red diaper rash**, which does not go away with usual diaper creams or ointments.

Treatment of a Yeast Overgrowth

- **Allow your nipples to air dry** after nursing or pumping.
- **Generously apply clotrimazole 1% or miconazole 2% cream** (both available for purchase over the counter) to the affected nipple and breast area after every nursing or pumping.
- **You should notice an improvement in your symptoms within two days after starting the cream.** If after two days you do not notice any improvement, please let your health care provider or IBCLC know.



- **Ibuprofen may help with severe nipple discomfort.** You may take 400 mg every 4 hours (maximum of 2400 mg in 24 hours) as needed.
- There is some evidence that **oral supplements of probiotics** may help decrease yeast overgrowth in the mouth, and theoretically, may help elsewhere on the body. If you decide to take probiotics, take according to the directions on the bottle for two weeks beyond any symptoms to help prevent reoccurrence.
- If you and your IBCLC have determined that you have a yeast overgrowth and topical treatments are not working, please consider seeing your health care provider or our breastfeeding medicine specialist. **Diflucan (fluconazole), a prescription antifungal medication, may be prescribed.**
- **If your baby has visible thrush (not just a white tongue),** and you and your IBCLC have determined that you are struggling with yeast overgrowth, please call your baby's health care provider to discuss possible treatments for your baby. If your baby is prescribed oral Nystatin, do not apply oral Nystatin suspension to mothers' nipples.
- **If your baby has visible thrush that is resistant to treatment AND uses a pacifier,** you may want to purchase a new pacifier and boil it daily until the thrush is resolved.
- **If your baby's diaper area is red and inflamed,** you may wash the diaper area with water, let it air dry, and apply clotrimazole or miconazole cream to the diaper area. If you are applying the cream to your nipples, please use a different tube of cream for your baby's bottom.

What about the use of gentian violet?

Gentian violet, an antiseptic dye with anti-fungal properties, has been recalled in Canada out of concern that components of gentian violet may be cancer causing. It is still available over the counter in the U.S., but we no longer recommend using it in a baby's mouth. Very stubborn cases of yeast overgrowth may be treated with the prescription medication Diflucan, but many times there is another cause of nipple redness and pain in mothers that may be identified by an IBCLC or a breastfeeding medicine specialist.

Reviewed April 2023