

TREATING THRUSH

Thrush (candidiasis or yeast) is a fungal infection caused by an overgrowth of the candida organism. Candida normally inhabits the mouth, gastrointestinal tract, and vagina, but can overrun almost any part of the body under the right conditions. For breast-feeding mothers this includes the breasts and nipples because thrush thrives in warm, moist conditions.

SYMPTOMS

- The first symptom of thrush is usually pain. Many mothers describe the pain of thrush as a burning or stabbing pain in the nipple, the breast, or both. The pain may begin during a feeding and continue between feedings. Pumping is usually painful as well.
- Thrush may cause nipple itching or flaking, redness or shininess, or, rarely, white spots on the nipple or areola. Sometimes there is a red or pink rash with small blisters on the nipple or areola.
- The mother may have a vaginal yeast infection or have had one recently.
- The baby may have signs of oral thrush: a “mother of pearl” look to the saliva or white patches in the mouth which look like left-over milk but will bleed if scraped.
- The baby may also have a bright red diaper rash which doesn't respond to usual treatments.
- The baby may be fussy or gassy or find nursing uncomfortable or painful. The baby may become fussy at the breast, refuse the breast, or come “off and on” the breast frequently.
- It is important to note, however, that there may be

no visible symptoms in either the mother or the baby. Pain may be the only symptom.

TREATMENT

An appointment should be made with a health care provider to confirm the diagnosis. Possible treatments fall into three basic categories: medications requiring a physician's prescription, over-the-counter and herbal remedies, and home management techniques which work in conjunction with other forms of treatment. It is wise to treat both the mother and child even if only one appears to be experiencing any symptoms.

Medications: If only the nipples appear to be involved, your health care provider may prescribe a topical antifungal (ointment or cream) to be used on the nipples. A liquid version also needs to be prescribed for treatment of the baby's mouth even if the baby is not exhibiting any symptoms.

Systemic antifungals may be prescribed if the milk ducts also appear to be involved or topical treatment has been unsuccessful. Many mothers find that a single dose is not effective. Sometimes treatment needs to continue for as long as two weeks.

Gentian violet is an antifungal that does not require a prescription but it should not be used without consulting your health care provider as it can be dangerous if used improperly or for too long.

Herbs/Alternative Treatments: A vinegar and water solution (1 tablespoon vinegar to 1 cup water) is an easy and effective treatment for nipples, especially when used in conjunction with other treatments. Apply to the nipples and areolae with a clean cotton ball after each feeding. Allow the nipples to air dry.

Oral supplements of acidophilus contain beneficial bacteria that can help to limit the



candida in the digestive tract. Acidophilus is available at health food stores in the refrigerator section. For best results, acidophilus should be taken for two weeks beyond the end of the symptoms.

Other herbal or natural remedies are highly effective for some people. A naturopathic doctor (N.D.) or a qualified herbalist can help.

Home Care Measures: All toys, pacifiers, bottle nipples, pump kit parts, breast shells, nipple shields, etc. should be boiled daily for twenty minutes. Pacifiers and other rubber nipples need to be replaced weekly. Any items that are damp or come into contact with the baby's saliva or your breast milk may harbor yeast.

Wash breast pads, bras, and cloth diapers in hot, soapy water. Bleach (one cup) in the wash water or vinegar (one cup) in the rinse water can be effective. Items should be dried in a hot dryer or line dried in the sun. The heat of an iron can kill yeast on clothing.

Paper towels can be used for handwashing and bath towels should be used only once before washing. Change toothbrushes frequently.

All family members should be treated for yeast infections of any kind including vaginal yeast, jock itch, finger/toe nail yeast infections, and diaper rash. Even pets can harbor yeast. Dietary changes can help minimize yeast growth. Decreasing the sugars on which yeast thrives is very helpful. Reducing consumption of dairy products or yeast-containing foods, including alcohol, can also be helpful. The addition of garlic to the diet may boost the immune system and help to keep yeast in check.

OTHER CAUSES OF NIPPLE/BREAST PAIN

Positioning and latch-on problems should always be ruled out when considering sources of pain. Other conditions can cause breast or nipple pain which may look like thrush. The conditions include but are not limited to: contact dermatitis, herpes, mastitis, eczema, psoriasis, poison ivy, ringworm, improper use of a breast pump, allergies, or nipple injury. Each of these should be considered, especially when treatment

for thrush has been unsuccessful.

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