Vulvovaginitis

What is vulvovaginitis?
Vulvovaginitis is inflammation of the skin of the external genital region in women. It is a type of dermatitis that involves the vulva — the soft genital area that surrounds the vagina — and also the vagina itself. It can be regarded as a type of mild infection, which is referred to as a non-specific infection, because there is usually no specific bug responsible. Thrush is rare in young girls and unfortunately is an over-diagnosed cause of this condition.

Vulvovaginitis in children:
Vulvovaginitis can affect women of any age, but it is particularly common in young prepubertal girls, especially between the ages of two and eight. The skin of the vulva and vagina is thin and poorly developed at this age and is susceptible to the action of germs from the skin and the anus.

What is the cause of vulvovaginitis?
It is usually a result of minor infection in the area and sensitivity to various irritants, such as soaps and urine. Following are factors that contribute to this problem:

- A sensitive, thin skin, which is a feature in some girls.
- Irritants such as soap, urine and feces.
- Moisture and humidity.
- Wet swimming costume.
- Lack of hygiene.
- Dribbling of urine, especially in obese girls.
- Frequent self-handling, including masturbation.
- Eczema in susceptible children.
- Sometimes an infection can be caused by the streptococcus bacteria, which causes a tender, red vulvovaginal area and is treated with penicillin.

What are the symptoms?
- The main symptom is recurrent episodes of discomfort and soreness.
- Another is mild stinging on passing urine. (This is often confused with a urinary infection in which passing urine is usually burning and painful. It is important for your doctor to check the urine to make sure.)
- There may be a smelly vaginal discharge or more commonly a slight yellow discharge may be seen on the underwear.
- Itching, causing the child to scratch the genital area, thus aggravating the problem.

What are uncommon causes?
- There are important underlying subtle causes to keep in mind with vulvovaginitis in children. These include:
  - A foreign object in the vagina, such as a small toy. This should be considered if the discharge is heavy.
  - Sexual abuse.
  - Pinworm — also known as threadworm. This should be considered especially if there is considerable scratching at night.

What are the risks?
Vulvovaginitis is a common and generally harmless condition. One complication is adhesion of the labia, where the inner folds of the vulva stick together, but it is easily treated. It is important to seek medical attention if there is painful urination (which suggests infection of the bladder), excessive scratching (check the anal area one hour after going to sleep for worms) or a heavy, bloodstained discharge (may indicate deeper infection).

What is the treatment?
Attention to good hygiene is the first line of treatment. The child should have regular warm baths followed by careful drying. It is helpful for the child to soak in a warm shallow bath containing half a cup of white vinegar. Alternatively 10g of bicarbonate of soda (baking soda) added to 1L of warm water can be used.

Soothing creams should be applied about three times a day. Those used for napkin rash are suitable, but recommended creams include zinc and castor oil cream or Ego dermat ointment.

If a powder is required use zinc oxide; for example, Curash.

What are preventive methods?
Attention to bathing and drying as described above. Teach good toileting practice under parental supervision. Dress the children in cotton underwear and with loose-fitting clothing.

Things to avoid:
- Perfumed soaps.
- Bubble baths.
- Soap residues after bathing.
- Sitting in wet swimming costumes (change immediately after swimming).
- Synthetic underwear.
- Becoming overweight.