

Thrush ~

What is it and What Can I Do About it?

While sore nipples may occur in the beginning of a mother's breastfeeding experience, it is not normal for a mother to suddenly begin experiencing painful nipples after a period of pain-free breastfeeding. If all other causes have been ruled out, such as improper positioning or latch-on, a thrush infection should be considered as the possible cause of irritation and pain.

What is Thrush?

Thrush (candidiasis) is a common overgrowth of yeast that affects many babies and mothers. In babies, the most common area to develop yeast is in the mouth and/or diaper area. While thrush is not a serious condition, it can certainly make breastfeeding uncomfortable if left untreated. Once thrush is diagnosed, it is important to treat both you and your baby so as not to pass the infection back and forth. To many mothers, it is both reassuring and important to know that breastfeeding can and should continue during treatment.

What Are The Symptoms?

If a breastfeeding mother experiences any of the following symptoms, she may have a thrush infection:

- ♥ Itchy, "burning" nipples
- ♥ "Shooting" pains in the breast during or after breastfeeding
- ♥ Bright pink nipples extending into the areola (where baby's mouth touches)
- ♥ "Flaky" nipple skin
- ♥ Symptoms of a vaginal yeast infection

For the breastfed baby, symptoms of thrush may include:

- ♥ Creamy white spots or a "film" inside the mouth, on the gums or on the tongue
- ♥ Small red spots on the inside of the mouth, on the gums or on the tongue
- ♥ Diaper rash with raised, "patchy" areas or a shiny appearance
- ♥ Sudden onset of fussiness at the breast, including pulling off the breast during a feeding
- ♥ Gassiness or colic symptoms
- ♥ Slow weight gain

Infants who suck their thumb may also develop yeast around their fingernails.

It is possible for thrush to be present even without any visible symptoms on either mother or baby. Once you suspect there is a problem, you should contact your health care provider to confirm a diagnosis and begin treatment for both you and your baby.

How Do You Get Thrush?

Yeast is the cause of many common skin irritations found from the top of the head to the tips of the toes. "Jock itch", athlete's foot and certain forms of dandruff all can be attributed to an overgrowth of yeast. Even the family pet can be the source of yeast! Yeast infections can be easily spread between family members as a result of their close contact. Thrush is simply another type of yeast infection that commonly occurs between breastfeeding mothers and their babies. The most common routes of transmission between mother to baby include passage through the birth canal or during breastfeeding.

Some mothers find they are more prone to yeast infections than others. **Some factors that may increase the likelihood of yeast infection include:**

- ♥ History of vaginal yeast infections
- ♥ Use of antibiotics, steroids, antidepressants or oral contraceptives
- ♥ History of diabetes (gestational or insulin-dependent)
- ♥ Pregnancy
- ♥ Cesarean delivery (usually given antibiotics post-delivery to prevent infection)
- ♥ History of anemia
- ♥ Living in a humid environment
- ♥ Maternal obesity
- ♥ Wearing constrictive clothing (wet bathing suits, panty hose, tight jeans or wet bras and nursing pads)

Treatment Measures

Remember, it is important to treat both you and your baby for a thrush infection. To begin with, your baby's pediatrician will most likely prescribe a topical antifungal for baby's diaper area along with an oral liquid anti-fungal medication for baby's mouth such as oral nystatin solution. To apply the oral nystatin, use a cotton swab to reach all areas of your baby's mouth. Make sure to swab your baby's gums, roof of the mouth, under his tongue and between his cheeks. It is important that the medication contact each of the yeast patches thoroughly in order to treat the infection.

There are also topical medications that can be applied to the nipple skin and diaper area that are available without a prescription. Other medications may be available by prescription only.

Regular applications of medication are very important as yeast replicates quickly (in less than 3 hours). You and your baby should be treated after each feeding, as this is when the transfer of the yeast organism takes place. Relief from symptoms should be felt within 72 hours and medication should continue to be taken until the symptoms are not present for at least ten days to two weeks. If relief is not felt within this 72-hour time frame, another medication or treatment should be considered.

You will most likely be prescribed an antifungal ointment or cream to apply to your nipples. It is important to make sure the ointment or cream is applied to the complete area where your baby's mouth comes in contact with your breast. If you are using breast pads, you should change them at each feeding during a thrush outbreak.

Herbal or Alternative Treatments

Anecdotal information on the use of herbal and homeopathic remedies has shown them to be helpful when used both with and without conventional medical treatments. Women have reported relief from nipple pain with the use of topical application of calendula (tincture of marigold) or tea tree oil. A weak vinegar solution (1 tablespoon of white or cider vinegar to 1 cup of sterile water) can be used to rinse the nipples after each feeding. Oral antifungal treatments include Pau d' Arco, acidophilus capsules or Echinacea capsules. Before using one of these herbal treatments, be sure to consult with your health care provider or a Board Certified Lactation Consultant.

Suggestions for Management of Thrush

Mother

- ♥ Begin nursing on the least sore breast and switch after letdown has occurred.
- ♥ Purified lanolin or gel pads can be soothing when applied after topical anti-fungal treatments.
- ♥ Wash hands before touching your breasts (as when using a breast pump) or before and after feeding the baby since milk is a perfect growth medium for the yeast organism.
- ♥ Clothing should be washed in the hottest water allowable for the fabric
- ♥ Sanitize daily all pump milk collection kit parts that touch your breast or milk.
- ♥ Use disposable paper nursing pads.
- ♥ Cut down on sugary foods, wheat, cheeses and fermented food products.
- ♥ Add dietary supplements such as vitamin C, zinc and B complex vitamins to your diet.
- ♥ Adding garlic and yogurt with live cultures to your diet may be helpful.

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Baby

- ♥ Anything that goes into baby's mouth should be sanitized daily. The dishwasher can "sanitize" most of these items as well. Be sure to discard all teething toys, bottle nipples and pacifiers and replace as the course of medication and/or treatment is completed.
- ♥ If baby has a diaper rash, be sure to keep his/her bottom clean and dry. Let your baby's bottom air dry several times daily if possible.
- ♥ Use an appropriate antifungal cream on the diaper rash.
- ♥ If baby is getting medication through an eyedropper, wash the eyedropper with hot soapy water and rinse well before replacing in the bottle of medication.
- ♥ Use a disposable cup and cotton swab to apply medication to your baby's mouth to avoid contamination of the unused medication.
- ♥ Remember that babies like to put their hands in their mouth! Wash the baby's hands gently before each feeding and dry with a soft paper towel.
- ♥ Be sure that the medication for baby's mouth is shaken well. Oral nystatin settles out its liquid suspension during storage.

The Whole Family

- ♥ Frequent hand washing is critical to prevent the spread of yeast.
- ♥ Use regular soap – antibacterial soaps will kill the good bacteria that prevent yeast from overgrowing.
- ♥ Use paper towels rather than fabric hand towels. Yeast multiplies on moist toweling and can spread to the next user.
- ♥ Use bath towels once and then wash in hot water.

Above all, remember that you and your baby need to be treated simultaneously. If you continue to experience nipple pain after treatment, consider checking for a simultaneous bacterial infection or dermatitis of the nipple. Sore nipples or breasts are the number one reason why women stop breastfeeding, so getting quick and appropriate treatment is essential.

If you would like additional information on the treatment of thrush, the Internet can provide you with several valuable references. Run a search on "Infant Thrush" or "Nipple Thrush" and you will find several useful websites.

Please remember that this is general breastfeeding information only and does not replace the advice of your healthcare provider. If you have a problem that you are unable to resolve quickly, seek help immediately.

Written by: Vergie Hughes, RN, MS, IBCLC
Edited by: Anne P. Mark, BSN, RN, IBCLC
References on File.

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