Vulvovaginal Candidiasis in Women Attending an STD Clinic in Mumbai

Sheela Sugathan
Associate Professor, Department of Microbiology, Sree Narayana Institute of Medical Sciences, Ernakulam, Kerala

ABSTRACT
Vulvovaginal candidiasis is one of the commonest but distressing conditions experienced by women of reproductive age group. The aim was to study the prevalence of vulvovaginal candidiasis in a randomly selected group of women attending a STD clinic. 166 women with complaints of abnormal vaginal discharge were subjected to speculum examination. Vaginal swabs were collected for microscopy, culture and identification. Abnormal vaginal discharge was noted in 16.8%. Candida was detected in 40.4%. with C.albicans predominating (78.5%) followed by C. parapsilosis (6.2%), C. guillermondii (4.6%), C. tropicalis (3.1%), C. krusei (1.5%), C. lipolytica (1.5%). High prevalence of candidial infection suggests that laboratory diagnosis be carried out as a routine screening procedure in women attending STD and antenatal clinics for appropriate treatment.

INTRODUCTION
Candidal vaginitis is the second most common cause of vaginitis, affecting millions of women especially in the reproductive age group (Sobel, 1997), causing distress in most.

There is estimated 15-54% incidence in the general population. 75% of women experience at least one episode of vaginitis during their lifetime and up to 5% of women with acute infection experience recurrent vulvovaginal candidiasis. The labia and vulva are often swollen, erythematous and symptoms include thick, white-coloured vaginal discharge, vulvar pruritus, dyspareunia and dysuria (Ling Zhi Heng et al, 2012).

One of the common causes is a fungi, candida, probably due to disruption of the normal balance between Candida, bacterial flora and immune defense mechanisms leading to its colonization (Sobel , 1998 Sobel, 2005) favoured by an abundance of carbohydrates and an acidic environment. Several risk factors for vulvovaginal candidiasis include sexual transmission from the partner, pregnancy, menstruation, broad spectrum antibiotics usage, hormonal fluctuations diet, stress, personal hygiene. Frequent sexual intercourse is a strong risk factor (seven or more times a week), B Foxman, 1990.

MATERIALS AND METHODS
This was a prospective study conducted at the STD clinic of Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai attached to the Topiwala National Medical College, Mumbai. During the one-year study period 994 patients attended the clinic with various complaints. A total of 166, randomly selected patients with complaints of abnormal vaginal discharge were included in the study. All patients were in the reproductive age group, the youngest 15 and the oldest 45 years of age. Clinical history and findings were recorded. All samples were collected after obtaining consent from the patients. A sterile warm water lubricated speculum was introduced into the vagina. The vagina was exposed with a powerful overhead lamp. Three specimens were collected from posterior fornix of the vagina in quick successions using sterile swabs. The physical characters of the discharge such as colour, consistency, type and amount were observed.

One swab was dipped into Stuart’s transport medium for culture, one in saline suspension and the other used for gram staining. All samples were transported to the laboratory for further processing.

The swab for direct smear examination was stained by gram stain for demonstration of pseudohyphae and yeast cells. Saline wet mount was taken on a clean glass slide with cover slip and examined under high power (40X) for blastospores. The swabs from Stuart’s media were cultured on Sabouraud’s dextrose agar and incubated aerobically at 37°C. and observed daily for growth. The isolates were identified based on standard microbiological methods including cultural morphology, Gram staining, germ-tube test, demonstration of chlamydospores and sugar fermentations tests (Cruickshank et al, 1975). The pigmented yeasts were identified by smear morphology, colour, India ink staining and urease tests.

OBSERVATION AND RESULTS
The frequency of abnormal vaginal discharge was 16.8% (166/994).

Table 1 : Status of the patients
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Cases studied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-pregnant women</td>
<td>81 (48.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial sex workers</td>
<td>71 (42.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnant women</td>
<td>14 (8.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cases</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

65.7% of the women were in the age group 21- 30 years. Yeasts were isolated from 40.4% of the patients.

Table 2: Age-wise distribution of patients
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age groups</th>
<th>Number of cases</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15 – 20 yrs</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 – 25 yrs</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 – 30 yrs</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 – 35 yrs</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 – 40 yrs</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41 – 45 yrs</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abnormal vaginal discharge is one of the commonest and the most vexing complaints recorded in women. They inflict socially backward class to use the clinical facilities available.

Municipal STD clinic in Mumbai enables women of economically backward group to have easy access to the clinic. The study was carried out in Mumbai being a port as well as an industrial destination is home to people from all over the country. Commercial sex workers are considered reservoirs for sexually transmitted diseases. 42.8% of the women in this study were commercial sex workers are considered reservoirs for sexually transmitted diseases. 42.8% of the women in this study were commercial sex workers.

Discussion

Mumbai being a port as well as an industrial destination is home to people from all over the country. Commercial sex workers are considered reservoirs for sexually transmitted diseases. 42.8% of the women in this study were commercial sex workers. Most patients were exclusively from the low economic strata, from slums with poor personal hygiene and in the sexually-active reproductive age group 21 – 30 years, 109/166 (65.7%). The clinic where the study was carried out being a municipal STD clinic in Mumbai enables women of economically backward class to use the clinical facilities available.

Abnormal vaginal discharge is one of the commonest and the most vexing complaints recorded in women. They inflict women in all socio-economic strata. The frequency of abnormal vaginal discharge was 16.8%. The rate of candida detection from vaginal swabs was as high (40.4%) in this study. Other workers have reported similarly high incidences of candidal infection in commercial workers 40.6% (Ramjee G, et al, 1998), 45% (Bellitti F, et al, 2002). However, the high incidence of fungal infection were equally distributed among both groups (sex workers & others)

Candida albicans is a known opportunistic pathogen but the mere presence should not be taken as synonymous with clinical disease. The pathogenicity is a matter of debate. There are many who believe that the isolation of C. albicans should lead to treatment. There are suggestions that persons who receive prolonged broad spectrum antibiotics be carefully observed for evidence of fungal infection. These suppress the susceptible bacteria and these may be replaced by yeast or yeast-like organisms. Another possible explanation is that it is due to the removal of bacteria that co-exist with candida. This results in enhancement of competitive power of C. albicans for the nutrients thus increasing the incidence.

C. albicans was the predominant (78.5%) candida species. This concurs with the findings reported by Bellitti F et al (2002), Buscemi L et al (2004), Ferrer J. (2000)

Though C. albicans is the common pathogen in 80-90% of cases, non-albicans candida species are gaining importance as pathogens over the past few decades (Kent, 1991) There has been an increasing trend in isolation of C. glabrata, C. krusei, C. parapsilosis from patients with symptomatic vulvovaginitis, (Mahmoudi Rad M et al, 2012). In the study the predominant non-albicans candida was C. parapsilosis (6.2%). How far the other candida species causes disease is still not clear but some of the species like C. stellatoidea, C. krusei and C. tropicalis are known to produce vulvovaginitis in occasional cases. It is reported resistance to commonly used antifungal drugs are increasing among them.

Rhodotorulla species has been isolated from various clinical samples like skin, urine, stool, sputum, respiratory secretions, gastric washing, blood, vagina, and cerebrospinal fluid of hospitalized patients (Dorey et al, 2002) and from biofilms (Nunes JM et al, 2013). However their pathogenicity is of doubtful significance and claimed to be a normal symbiont of humid skin and lacks pathogenicity. Rhodotorulla species was isolated in 3.1% of fungal isolates.

Candidiasis is said to be influenced by the female menstrual and pregnancy cycles. Though the number of pregnant women who attended the clinic was not enough for a good representation, a high incidence of candidiasis (64.3%) was noted in them and Candida albicans was the commonly encountered species (77.8%).

Vulvovaginal candidiasis is usually straightforward to treat but complicated and recurrent candidiasis can cause considerable psychological morbidity. A positive sign noted in this study was that 44.6% of the commercial sex workers presented earlier to the clinic than others (27.7%), some even presenting 9-12 months after onset of symptoms.

As the prevalence of candida infection was high in the study group it is recommended that laboratory diagnosis be carried out as a routine screening procedure in women attending STD and antenatal clinics and given appropriate treatment. A simple Gram staining procedure is a good reliable test for a presumptive diagnosis.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Dr. Prema Murti, Former HOD, Department of Microbiology, Topiwala National Medical College, Mumbai, for her guidance and the TNMC authorities for permitting me to carry out the research.

References

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