

Recurrent vulvovaginal symptoms in primary care

Recognising recurrent thrush, and the look-alikes that can hide behind the label.

WHAT COUNTS AS RECURRENT? ¹

Four or more episodes in 12 months, with two confirmed on microscopy or culture. Clear gaps between episodes point towards recurrence. A continuous, lingering picture points more towards a resistant strain or another cause than towards recurrent thrush.

1 Think beyond thrush: how the look-alikes differ ²

Feature	Lichen sclerosis	Candidiasis	Menopause (GSM)
Itch	Often severe	Common	Common
Typical age	Any; commoner pre-puberty and post-menopause	Commoner post-puberty, pre-menopause	Low-oestrogen states
Skin colour	White	Red if inflamed	Pale pink
Vaginal involvement	No	Yes	Yes
Change in architecture	Yes, often marked; fusion or scarring	No (transient swelling in flares)	Mild, symmetrical, gradual
Perianal involvement	Yes	No	No
Discharge	No	Often	Possible

2 In the consultation: a practical checklist ^{1,3}

- ☐ Ask **how many episodes** in the past year, and whether symptoms settle in between.
- ☐ Ask about **self-treatment**, which can skew a swab taken afterwards.
- ☐ Offer a **self-swab** to take when symptomatic and before treating.
- ☐ Offer **examination** to anyone with recurrent vulvovaginal symptoms, so the differential stays open.
- ☐ **Record or code** the episodes so the pattern is visible at the next visit.
- ☐ **Think beyond thrush:** lichen sclerosis, vulvodynia, dermatitis, GSM.
- ☐ **Lichen sclerosis clue:** white, fragile skin in a figure-of-eight around the vulva and perianal area. ²
- ☐ Remember vulval conditions can **coexist**, and symptoms are often non-specific. ²

SAFETY-NET • WHEN TO REFER ²

Consider referral on a **suspected-cancer pathway** for persistent hyperkeratosis, an eroded or ulcerated area, or a papule or nodule.

REFERENCES

- Ford T, Ziebland S, Tonkin-Crine S, Hayward G, McNiven A. 'It's not just thrush, it's recurrent thrush': a qualitative study of patient and clinician perspectives on diagnosing recurrent vulvovaginal candidiasis. Br J Gen Pract 2026. doi.org/10.3399/BJGP.2025.0437
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DISCLAIMERS

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