

'MY VAGINA CRACKED UP'

Sarah Smythe, 38, London

'IN MY EARLY 30S I WOKE ONE DAY WITH WHAT I THOUGHT WAS A BAD BOUT OF THRUSH.

I was itchy, sore and the skin on my vagina was red and inflamed. Days

later it still hadn't cleared and I'd developed a nasty thick discharge: the colour and texture of egg-white. I tried thrush cream – it didn't work. The doctor prescribed stronger medication – that failed too. Months passed and I was prescribed every cream and pessary going. I rubbed on tea-tree oil diluted with water and ate pro-biotic yoghurts but my vagina remained red, raw and so itchy I could barely concentrate at work. The skin started cracking and stung when I went to the loo. My sex life was non-existent and even my wardrobe had to change. Gone were all my tight-fitting party trousers – exchanged for loose, floaty, cotton skirts. After three years of what I thought was persistent thrush, and close to



Sarah thought she had thrush – for three

despair, I was referred to the gynaecology unit of my local hospital. "I think you have allergic vulval dermatitis," the gynaecologist said. "The skin of your vagina is allergic to synthetic products." She asked if I used tampons, then recommended I switch to 100% organic cotton ones, like Natracare. I couldn't believe the answer was so simple! I was allergic to the synthetic fibres in my normal tampons and each time I'd used them I'd had a bad reaction. The time between my periods wasn't long enough for my body to recover, so it felt like a continual infection. After I started using the organic tampons it took a couple of months for the condition to clear up, but two years on I have no more trouble "down there"!

WATCH OUT FOR ALLERGIC VULVAL DERMATITIS

COMMON SYMPTOMS:

- Intense vulval itching and swelling.
- A burning sensation when you pee.
- Pain during sex.

WHO TO SPEAK TO: Explain your symptoms to a GP who may refer you to a gynaecologist or dermatologist.

For your nearest support group see www.vulvalpain.society.org.