

■ Understanding “Thrush” (Yeast) and Nipple Pain

It's very common for parents to worry that nipple pain or a white tongue means a “yeast infection,” but true thrush is actually quite rare in full-term, healthy, exclusively breastfed babies.

■ What You're Seeing Might Be “Milk Tongue”

Most of the time, the white coating seen on a baby's tongue is just breastmilk residue, not yeast. It wipes away easily or fades between feedings, and babies are otherwise comfortable and feeding well. Thrush is more common in premature or immune-compromised infants, such as babies in the NICU.

■ You Don't Need to Treat Yourself

Even if your baby's doctor thinks thrush might be present, it's not contagious (just like vaginal yeast infections aren't). That means you don't need to take antifungal medication yourself, and there's no need to sterilize every bottle, toy, or pump part. Using harsh cleaning products can actually make things worse by irritating the skin.

■ When Pain Is Not Yeast

The truth is, what many people call “yeast pain” often turns out to be something else:

- Dermatitis or eczema – dry, flaky, itchy skin around the nipple or areola.
- Vasospasm – a sudden tightening of blood vessels that causes burning or stinging after feeding.
- Nerve sensitivity – sharp, shooting, or burning pain that continues after nursing.

These conditions can all mimic “yeast,” but respond better to gentle skin care and appropriate topical treatment, not antifungal creams.

■ Treatment That Works

If nipples are sore, red, or have blebs (tiny white spots), we often use a mild prescription steroid ointment such as triamcinolone to calm inflammation and help healing. Over-the-counter hydrocortisone is usually too weak to help, and antifungal or antibacterial creams often make irritation worse.

■ The Bottom Line

True fungal infection of the nipple is extremely rare and not supported by medical evidence. In nearly all cases, pain has another cause — and relief comes from identifying and treating that cause, not from antifungal medication.

Your milk, your baby, and your body are not the problem — sometimes the skin just needs a little extra care and support to heal. ■

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