

Bacterial Vaginosis



What is bacterial vaginosis?

Many types of good bacteria live in the vagina and keep it healthy. Bacterial vaginosis (BV) occurs when too much of a certain type of bacteria grow. Bacterial vaginosis is the most common vaginal infection in women of childbearing age. Bacterial vaginosis is not a sexually transmitted infection.

How do I know I have bacterial vaginosis?

You may have more vaginal discharge than usual. Your discharge may be gray or white and have a “fishy” smell. This smell is often worse right after you have sex. You also may have pain during sex, burning or itching in your vagina, burning when you urinate (pee), or light vaginal bleeding. Many women who have BV do not notice any symptoms.

Why did I get bacterial vaginosis?

You can get BV when an imbalance of the normal bacteria in your vagina occurs. This allows too much of the bacteria that cause BV to grow. Any woman can get BV. Health care providers do not know exactly why BV happens. Several things can increase your chance of getting BV, including:

- Having a new sexual partner
- Having many sexual partners
- Douching
- Not having enough good bacteria in your vagina
- Being a black woman

When should I see a health care provider?

You should call your health care provider if you think you might have a vaginal infection. Your provider can check your vagina and test your vaginal discharge to see if you have BV, a different vaginal infection, or a sexually transmitted infection. All of these vaginal infections can have similar symptoms.

What is the best treatment for bacterial vaginosis?

If you have vaginal symptoms that bother you and if the test your provider does shows that you have BV, then you will be given antibiotics to take. Your sexual partner does not need to take the antibiotic. Three different types of antibiotics can be used. You might be given pills to swallow or gel or cream to place in your vagina. These antibiotics can cause mild nausea or stomach pain. Also, drinking alcohol while you are taking the pills can make you very sick. The cream can cause weakness in latex condoms and diaphragms, so you should use a different method of birth control for 5 days after you finish the medicine that is placed in the vagina. Take all your medicine even if your symptoms go away. The chance that your symptoms will return increases if you stop the medicine early.

How can I prevent bacterial vaginosis?

- Avoid sexually transmitted infections.
Your chance of having BV increases if you have a sexually transmitted infection. You are less likely to get BV and sexually transmitted infections if you limit your number of sexual partners and if your male partner uses a condom during sex.
- Decrease irritation to your vagina.
Use gentle, unscented soap. Wear cotton underwear. Change pads and tampons often and use ones that are unscented (no artificial smell added). Do not use vaginal deodorants or scented toilet paper.

- Do not douche.
Douching takes away the normal bacteria that protect your vagina. This increases your chance of having a vaginal infection. Douching doesn't make vaginal infections go away. Your vagina doesn't need cleaning beyond normal bathing.
- Increase the good bacteria in your vagina.
Many women who get BV will have it more than once. You can take probiotic pills by mouth or place them in your vagina. Eating yogurt that contains lactobacilli each day also can help. These activities may help keep the bacteria in your vagina naturally balanced so that you won't get BV again.

How does bacterial vaginosis affect my baby and me if I am pregnant?

Women who have BV are more likely to have their babies early and get an infection in the uterus. We do not know yet if treating all women with BV will lower the chance of giving birth early or getting an infection. If you have symptoms of BV, treatment with medicine that is safe for your baby will make your symptoms go away and is recommended.

What complications can I have from bacterial vaginosis?

Most women who have BV do not have complications, but having BV does increase your chance of having the following medical problems:

- You are more likely to get a sexually transmitted infection like gonorrhea, chlamydia, or herpes if you have BV and are exposed to a sexually transmitted infection.
- You are more likely to get HIV if you are exposed to the virus that causes it, human immunodeficiency virus.
- The chance is higher that you will pass HIV to your partner if you have HIV and BV.
- The chance that you will have an infection after having female surgery like an abortion, dilation and curettage (D&C), or hysterectomy is higher if you have BV.

These risks make it important to be seen by your health care provider and get treated if you have symptoms of BV.

For More Information

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov/std/bv/STDFact-Bacterial-Vaginosis.htm>

Healthy Women

<http://www.healthywomen.org/condition/bacterial-vaginosis>

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