

Sexual Health

BACTERIAL VAGINOSIS



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Bacterial vaginosis, also referred to as BV, is a very common condition in women of reproductive age.

The normal vagina contains many types of bacteria. Bacterial vaginosis happens when there is an overgrowth of specific bacteria.

How is Bacterial Vaginosis spread?

Bacterial vaginosis is not considered to be a sexually transmitted infection (STI) but is more common in women who have been sexually active.

What are the symptoms?

About half of women with BV do not have symptoms. Other women may experience the following:

- Unpleasant or “fishy” smelling vaginal odour which is often worse after intercourse
- White or grey vaginal discharge that has a milk-like consistency
- May have pain when passing urine (rarely)
- May have pain or burning in the vagina during intercourse (rarely).

Bacterial vaginosis is not found in men.

How is Bacterial Vaginosis diagnosed?

Swabs are taken and discharge can also be examined under a microscope. A physician can often detect BV by odour alone.

How is Bacterial Vaginosis treated?

Bacterial vaginosis is treated with a specific medication that is prescribed by a doctor or nurse practitioner. Individuals may also find many “non-medical” or “natural” treatment suggestions. There is not enough evidence to recommend these at this time.

How important is follow-up?

Follow-up is not necessary unless the woman is pregnant or if symptoms reappear. For some women, recurrent BV is common.

Considerations and possible complications

- Generally speaking, there are no long-term complications for most women.
- BV during pregnancy may increase risk of pre-term labour and pre-term birth.
- If a woman has BV at the time of an abortion, gynecological surgery or IUD insertion, the infection can spread to the uterus and fallopian tubes. This can increase the risk of developing Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID).
- Women infected with BV may be at increased risk of acquiring HIV.

How can I reduce my chances of getting Bacterial Vaginosis?

- Avoid douching and the use of scented soaps.
- After a bowel movement, wipe from front to back so you don't bring rectal bacteria into the vagina.
- Avoid tight jeans.
- Avoid pantyhose without a cotton gusset.

Adapted with permission from the Middlesex London Health Unit.