



BACTERIAL VAGINOSIS (BV)

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) is the name of a condition in women where the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina is disrupted and replaced by an overgrowth of certain bacteria. It is sometimes accompanied by discharge, odor, pain, itching, or burning. Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) is the most common vaginal infection in women of childbearing age.

What causes bacterial vaginosis?

The cause of BV is not fully understood. BV is associated with an imbalance in the bacteria that are normally found in a woman's vagina. The vagina normally contains mostly "good" bacteria, and fewer "harmful" bacteria. BV develops when there is an increase in harmful bacteria. It is not clear what role sexual activity plays in the development of BV. Women do not get BV from toilet seats, bedding, swimming pools, or from touching objects around them. Women that have never had sexual intercourse are rarely affected.

What are the signs and symptoms of bacterial vaginosis?

Women with BV often have an abnormal vaginal discharge with an unpleasant odor. Some women report a strong fish-like odor, especially after intercourse. The discharge is usually white or gray, and it can be thin. Women with BV may have burning during urination or itching around the outside of the vagina, or both. Some women with BV report no signs or symptoms.

How is bacterial vaginosis diagnosed?

A health care provider must examine the vagina for signs of BV and perform laboratory tests on a sample of vaginal fluid to look for bacteria associated with BV.

How is bacterial vaginosis treated?

BV is treatable with antimicrobial medicines prescribed by a health care provider. Two different medicines are recommended: Metronidazole or Clindamycin. Either can be used with non-pregnant or with pregnant women, but the recommended dosages differ. BV can recur after treatment.

Although BV will sometimes clear up without treatment, all women with symptoms of BV should be treated to avoid complications. Treatment is especially important for pregnant women. All pregnant women, regardless of symptoms, should be examined for BV and be treated if necessary. Male partners generally do not need to be treated. However, BV may spread between female sex partners.

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Page 1 of 2



Who is at risk for bacterial vaginosis?

Any woman can get BV. However, some activities or behaviors can upset the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina and put women at increased risk including:

- Having a new sex partner or multiple sex partners,
- Douching, and
- Using an intrauterine device (IUD) for contraception.

What are the complications of bacterial vaginosis?

In most cases, BV causes no complications. But there are some serious risks from BV including:

- Increasing a woman's susceptibility to HIV infection if she is exposed to the HIV virus and increasing the chance that an HIV-infected woman can pass HIV to her sex partner.
- An increase in the development of pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) following surgical procedures such as a hysterectomy or an abortion.
- Increased risk for some complications of pregnancy.
- Increased susceptibility to other STDs, such as chlamydia and gonorrhea.

How can bacterial vaginosis be prevented?

Basic prevention steps can help reduce the risk of developing BV:

- Use latex or polyurethane condoms during sex.
- Limit the number of sex partners.
- Do not douche.
- Use all of the medicine prescribed for treatment of BV, even if the signs and symptoms go away.

For more information: Call the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at 1-800-232-4636, TTY: 1-888-232-6348 in English and Spanish.