

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. It is the most common vaginal infection in women of childbearing age.

How do people get bacterial vaginosis?

Not much is known about how women get BV. There are many unanswered questions about the role that harmful bacteria play in causing BV. 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 partners
- Douching

The cause of BV is not fully understood. 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 may also be affected.

What are the signs and symptoms of bacterial vaginosis?

Women with BV may have an abnormal vaginal discharge with an unpleasant odor. Some women report a strong fish-like odor, especially after intercourse. Discharge, if present, is usually watery and white or gray in color. Women with BV may also have burning during urination or itching around the outside of the vagina, or both. Some women with BV report no signs or symptoms at all.

How can bacterial vaginosis be prevented?

BV is not completely understood by scientists, and the best ways to prevent it are unknown. However, it is known that BV is associated with having a new sex partner or having multiple sex partners. It is seldom found in women who have never had intercourse.

The following basic prevention steps can help reduce the risk of upsetting the natural balance of bacteria in the vagina and developing BV:

- 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
- Be abstinent

What are the complications of bacterial vaginosis?

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

- Increase of getting HIV if exposed to HIV virus
- Increase risk of getting an infection after hysterectomy or abortion
- Increase risk of getting other STDs such as Herpes, chlamydia, and gonorrhea

How does bacterial vaginosis affect a pregnant woman and her baby?

Pregnant women with BV are more likely to deliver prematurely and have babies that weigh less than 5.5 pounds. Treatment is especially important for pregnant women.

What is the treatment for bacterial vaginosis?

Although BV will sometimes clear up without treatment, all women with symptoms of BV should be treated to avoid complications. Male partners generally do not need to be treated. However, BV may spread between female sex partners. BV is treatable with antibiotics prescribed by a health care provider. BV can recur after treatment. Possible medications or prescriptions you may receive from Planned Parenthood Shasta Pacific are:

- Metronidazole*: this is an antibiotic taken by mouth. Take according to directions on the bottle (Flagyl or Metryl).
 1. DO NOT take this medication if you are allergic to it or have any blood or central nervous system disease.
 2. DO NOT drink alcoholic beverages (beer, wine or mixed drinks) or use medication containing alcohol while taking this medication for twenty-four (24) hours before and twenty-four (24) hours after taking medication.
 3. Metronidazole may cause headache, nausea, diarrhea, constipation, headache, dry or metallic taste in mouth or body rash.
- Clindamycin Cream 2%*: one full applicator in vagina at bedtime for seven (7) days.
- Metronidazole Gel*: one full applicator one (1) times a day for five (5) days.
- Clindamycin*: Take according to directions on bottle.

Recurrent BV Infections

There are treatment options for women with recurrent BV infections. Please talk with your health care provider about which of these options may be appropriate for you:

- Metronidazole gel 0.75% twice a week for 6 months.
- Metronidazole 500 mg oral medication taken for 2 weeks
- Boric acid 600 mg in Type 0 gelatin capsules intravaginally once daily for 2 weeks

Preventative treatment options may not be covered by insurance. You may need to pay for these medications at the pharmacy.

For more information

STD information and referrals to STD Clinics
CDC-INFO 1-800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)
TTY: 1-888-232-6348 In English, en Español

CDC National Prevention Information Network (NPIN)

P.O. Box 6003
Rockville, MD 20849-6003
1-800-458-5231
1-888-282-7681 Fax
1-800-243-7012 TTY E-mail: info@cdcnpin.org

Your health is important to us. If you have any questions or concerns, please call us. We are happy to help you.