

Bacterial Vaginosis

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is an overgrowth of several bacteria that normally exist in the vagina. It is the most common cause of vaginal discharge in people with vaginas who are of childbearing age.

What are the symptoms of bacterial vaginosis?

Nearly half of all people with bacterial vaginosis will experience no symptoms at all.

For those people with symptoms:

- a foul or “fishy” smelling vaginal odor, which frequently increases following intercourse
- excessive amount of thin, white or gray discharge
- Itching

Pain during urination and swelling of the vulva are not associated with BV.

What causes bacterial vaginosis?

The exact cause of bacterial vaginosis is unknown. There could be a variety of causes and no single organism causes it.

- the natural balance of variety of bacteria found in the vagina changes
- Lactobacillus, a particularly important bacteria that keeps the vagina slightly acidic to help reduce the growth of potentially harmful organisms, decreases
- large increase in the number of potentially harmful bacteria numbers
- Resulting imbalance in numbers and kinds of bacteria is believed to be the cause of bacterial vaginosis

Risk factors for bacterial vaginosis include:

- Multiple male or female sexual partners
- Douching
- Cigarette smoking

How is bacterial vaginosis diagnosed?

Bacterial vaginosis is best diagnosed by a healthcare provider. The provider can perform a pelvic exam, check the vaginal PH, and examine vaginal secretions under a microscope. Self diagnosis is unreliable, and self treatment without an exam is not recommended.

How is bacterial vaginosis treated?

Your medical provider may prescribe either an oral or vaginal medication. It is important to take the medicine as directed and to abstain from sexual contact until the treatment is completed.

Re-examination after treatment is not necessary unless symptoms recur.

Does my partner need to be treated?

Bacterial vaginosis is not sexually transmitted. Partner treatment is not recommended. There is no evidence that partner treatment will prevent recurrence/ relapse.

Are there any complications associated with bacterial vaginosis?

Although by itself BV is not harmful, it is associated with some health problems:

- Pregnant people with BV are at higher risk of preterm delivery.
- People with BV who undergo gynecologic surgery may be at higher risk of infection in the surgical site.
- BV increases the risk of acquiring HIV, genital herpes, gonorrhea, or chlamydia.

What can I do to help prevent recurrences of bacterial vaginosis?

Many people will experience recurrences of BV. It is unclear why or how these recurrences or relapses occur, but they may be related to a lack of restoration of lactobacilli.

Here are a few recommendations to prevent recurrences:

- Do not douche. This may upset the normal vaginal balance.
- Limit the number of sexual partners, as women with multiple male or female partners are at higher risk for BV as well as STIs.
- Finish the entire course of treatment.
- Use of condoms and estrogen- containing contraceptives may be protective.

If you have frequent recurrences, talk with your provider about either a prolonged course of treatment or a suppressive regimen.