

Bacterial Vaginosis

What is Bacterial Vaginosis?

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) is an infection in the vagina that causes a bad smelling vaginal discharge (fluid that comes out of the vagina). Some vaginal discharge is normal, but people with BV often report having more discharge than normal, or discharge that smells bad.

Bacterial Vaginosis is caused by an imbalance of bacteria. It usually affects people who are sexually active, or have been in the past (with people either with a penis or a vagina).

Symptoms of Bacterial Vaginosis

Many people do not have symptoms. However, typical symptoms can include a “fishy-smelling” vaginal discharge that can be watery, off-white or gray. Occasionally people may note a burning sensation in their vagina. The smell can be worse during the menstrual period, or after sex with a partner with a penis (after semen mixes with the vaginal secretions/discharge). Other less common symptoms can include pain or itching in the vagina, as well as burning when urinating.

How is Bacterial Vaginosis spread?

We do not know why or how people get BV, but we do know that it typically occurs in sexually active people with a vagina. Bacterial vaginosis is linked to an imbalance of bacteria that is normally found in the vagina. Risk factors include: a new sex partner, having multiple sex partners, douching. We do not know how sex can contribute towards getting BV, except that studies show that it is not helpful to treat the partner. We do know that BV rarely occurs in people who have not had sex, and we know you do NOT get it from swimming pools, bedding, or toilet seats.

How is Bacterial Vaginosis treated?

BV sometimes goes away without treatment. If you do have symptoms then you should get checked and treated. BV is treated with Metronidazole and Clindamycin, which are antibiotics. They come in different forms, both orally (pills that you swallow) as well as a gel or cream you put in your vagina. You and your clinician can decide which is the right treatment for you. If you are prescribed medication then it is important that you complete the entire course of treatment.

Do my sexual partners need to be treated?

If your partner has a penis they do not need to be treated. If your partner has a vagina then you should inform them because they may also need to be treated (because they may also have bacterial vaginosis). Also, if you share sex toys it is very important to clean them well.

How to prevent getting Bacterial Vaginosis

We do not completely understand how or why one gets BV, and we do not know the best ways to prevent it either. Several steps may be helpful:

- Not having sex
- Limiting number of sexual partners
- Not douching
- Correct latex condom use
- Complete course of treatment (when given)

What if it comes back?

Because we do not understand why people get BV, it is hard to counsel them on how not to get it again. Approximately 30% of people with a vagina who initially improve after treatment will have a recurrence within three months, and more than 50% will have a recurrence within 12 months. If BV comes back it can be treated again, or treated for a longer period of time. For people who have had more than three episodes within one year then you should consider discussing with a clinician if it is worth trying a longer course of treatment.

There are some studies that suggest that use of birth control pills can be helpful in preventing BV. Use of condoms is recommended for partners with a penis if recurrence is an issue. There are also some studies that suggest IUDs (intrauterine devices) may increase risks for recurrent BV. BV does seem to increase risks of STIs (sexually transmitted infections), but it is unclear if BV makes it easier to contract sexually transmitted infections or if being exposed to one condition might mean that you get exposed to other conditions. It is important to be tested regularly for common STIs, such as gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis and HIV.