

Bacterial vaginosis, or BV, is a common vaginal infection in women. It is the most common vaginal infection in women of childbearing age, including pregnant women.

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)

While it is not a sexually transmitted disease (STD), some sexual behaviors increase the chances for BV. Women who have never had sex can also have BV.

How is it spread?

The vagina contains many different types of bacteria. Normally, there are large numbers of “good” bacteria that keep the number of “harmful” bacteria very low. Bacterial vaginosis occurs when this balance is upset and there are more “harmful” bacteria than “good” bacteria. The cause of BV is not fully understood.

The risk of BV is higher if you:

- ◆ Have a new sex partner or multiple sex partners.
- ◆ Douche.
- ◆ Do not use condoms.
- ◆ Have a female sexual partner with BV.

BV is more common in lesbian and bisexual women than in other women. The reason for this is unknown.

What are signs of BV in women?

Women with BV may have few or no signs of infection. Some women with BV have:

- ◆ Increased vaginal discharge:
 - Often watery.
 - Gray or white in color.
 - Sometimes has an unpleasant, fish-like odor, especially after sex.
- ◆ Itching or irritation in the vaginal area.
- ◆ Burning during urination.

How do you know if you have BV?

BV can be diagnosed during a medical exam. To check for BV, your health care provider looks for signs of infection and collects a sample of vaginal fluid for lab tests.

How is it treated?

BV is treated with antibiotics. These can be in pill form, creams, gels, or ovules. Sometimes BV goes away without treatment.

Female partners of women with BV may need treatment. Male sexual partners do not need treatment.



What can happen if you have BV for a long time?

Most often, BV does not cause other health problems. However, if left untreated, BV may increase your risk for:

- ◆ Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) like herpes, chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HIV.
- ◆ Pelvic inflammatory disease where BV bacteria infect the uterus or fallopian tubes. Pelvic inflammatory disease can cause infertility and increase the risk of ectopic (tubal) pregnancy.
- ◆ An infection after a procedure on the female organs. This includes cesarean section, abortion, and surgery on the cervix or uterus.
- ◆ Early labor or birth, if pregnant.

If you have BV:

- ◆ Always finish antibiotic treatment, even if the signs of BV go away.
- ◆ Talk to female sex partners about getting BV treatment.

How can you avoid BV?

Protect the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina by:

- ◆ Not douching.
- ◆ Asking your sex partners to be examined for BV.
- ◆ Having sex with only one person who only has sex with you.
- ◆ Using condoms during sex.
- ◆ Reducing the number of sex partners.
- ◆ Washing the genital area daily with mild soap and water.



For more information, see *Safer Sex* on page 77.

What about pregnancy?

BV is common in pregnant women. Treatment is very important. BV can increase the risk for:

- ◆ Low birth weight babies.
- ◆ Early labor and birth.

If you are pregnant and have BV, see your health care provider one month after finishing treatment.

For more on BV see:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

Bacterial Vaginosis – CDC Fact Sheet

www.cdc.gov/std/bv/STDFact-Bacterial-Vaginosis.htm

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Office on Women's Health:

Bacterial vaginosis fact sheet

www.womenshealth.gov/faq/bacterial-vaginosis.cfm

Douching fact sheet

www.womenshealth.gov/faq/douching.cfm