



Frequently Asked Questions about Bacterial Vaginosis

What is bacterial vaginosis (BV)?

BV is a type of vaginal infection that any woman can get. Chances are you have heard more about *yeast infections* than BV, but BV (not yeast) is the most common type of vaginal infection in women of childbearing age.

BV is often confused with yeast infections – they are not the same thing and they require different types of treatment. BV is linked to normal *bacteria* (germs) in the vagina getting out of balance. All women have mostly “good” and some “harmful” bacteria present in their vaginas. When harmful bacteria in the vagina increase, or overgrow, BV can develop. Yeast infections are caused by the yeast *Candida*, which also overgrows when the normal balance of the vagina becomes disturbed.

What are the signs of BV?

The main sign of BV is vaginal discharge (fluid from the vagina) with a fish-like odor. Some women say the odor is stronger after having sex. The discharge can be white (milky) or gray and it can be thin. Burning or pain when urinating can occur. While not common, Itching around the outside of the vagina and redness can also occur. It is important to know, though, that many women with BV have no symptoms at all.

How do women get BV? Is there anything that can put a woman at greater risk for getting BV?

Any woman can get BV. While not much is known about how a woman gets BV, some things can upset the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina and put women more at risk:

- Having a new sex partner or multiple sex partners.
- Douching.
- Using an intrauterine device (IUD) for birth control.

BV rarely affects women who have never had sexual intercourse. If you are pregnant and have BV, you are more at risk for certain problems. These can include having babies born early or with low birth weight

How can I find out if I have BV?

The only way to know for sure if you have BV is to have a lab test. Your health care provider will take a sample of fluid from your vagina and send it to a lab to check for bacteria that are linked to BV.

Does BV cause any problems?

In most cases, BV doesn't cause any problems. But, there can be some serious risks when a woman has BV:

- Pregnant women with BV more often have babies who are born early or with low birth weight.
- The bacteria that cause BV can sometimes cause *pelvic inflammatory disease* (PID), an infection of a woman's uterus (womb) and fallopian tubes (tubes that carry eggs from the ovaries to the uterus). PID can cause infertility (not being able to get pregnant). It can also increase a woman's risk for *ectopic pregnancy* (when a pregnancy occurs outside the uterus), which can be life threatening.
- Having BV can make a woman more at risk for getting infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
- If a woman has HIV and BV, she is more likely to pass HIV to her sex partner.
- BV can increase a woman's chances of getting other *sexually transmitted diseases* (STDs), such as *chlamydia* and *gonorrhea*.

How is BV treated?

BV is treated with *antimicrobial* medicines you get from your doctor, such as *metronidazole* or *clindamycin*. Both of these drugs can be used when you are pregnant. The dosage (or amount of the drug) will differ when you are pregnant. Women who are HIV positive and have BV get the same treatment as women who are HIV negative.

Most of the time, male sex partners of women with BV are not treated. But, your doctor might want to treat the man if the woman's infection is not cleared up with drugs. Many women don't get treated for BV. But, BV will not go away on its own and must be treated to relieve symptoms and prevent problems such as PID. It is important to know that you can get BV again.

If I have BV, do I need to worry about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)?

Even though much is not known or understood about BV, it has been linked with sexual intercourse. Having BV can increase your chances of getting infected with HIV or other STDs. Here are some things you can do to lower your risk for getting an STD:

- The best way to prevent an STD is to practice abstinence (don't have sex). Delaying having sex for the first time is another way to reduce your chances of getting an STD. Studies show that the younger people are when having sex for the first time, the more likely it is that they will get an STD. The risk of getting an STD also becomes greater over time, as the number of a person's sex partners increases.
- Have a sexual relationship with one partner who doesn't have any STDs, where you are faithful to each other (meaning that you only have sex with each other and no one else).
- Practice "safer sex." This means protecting yourself with a condom EVERY time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

For vaginal sex, use a latex male condom or a female polyurethane condom. For anal sex, use a latex male condom. If needed, use only water based lubricants with male and female condoms. For oral sex, use a *dental dam* – a device used by dentists, made out of a rubbery material, that you place over the opening to the vagina before having oral sex. If you don't have a dental dam, you can cut an unlubricated male condom open and place it over the opening to the vagina.

Even though it may be embarrassing, if you don't know how to use a male or female condom, talk to your health care provider. The biggest reason condoms don't work is because they are not used correctly.

- Be aware that condoms don't provide complete protection against STDs. But, they do decrease your chances of getting an STD. Know also that other methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms don't protect you from STDs. If you use one of these methods, be sure to also use a condom every time you have sex.
- Limit your number of sexual partners. Your risk of getting an STD increases with the number of partners you have.
- Don't douche. Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protects you from infection. This can increase your risk for getting an STD.
- Learn how to talk with your partner about STDs and using condoms. It's up to you to make sure you are protected. The organizations in the "For more information" at the end of this FAQ have tips for talking with your partner. You can also talk with your health care provider about this.
- When you are sexually active, especially if you have more than one partner, get regular exams for STDs from a health care provider. Tests for STDs can be done during an exam. And, the earlier an STD is found, the easier it is to treat.
- Learn the common symptoms of STDs. Seek medical help right away if you think you may have an STD.

What should I do if I have BV?

If you have BV:

- Get it treated right away. Having BV increases your risk for getting PID or for getting infected with an STD.
- Follow your doctor's orders and finish all the medicine that you are given. Even if the symptoms go away, you still need to finish all of the medicine.
- Avoid having any sexual activity while you are being treated for BV.
- Be sure to get a follow-up test to make sure that the infection has been cured.
- If the infection comes back, talk with your health care provider about having your sexual partners treated. Keep in mind, though, that there has been no evidence to date that sexual partners benefit from treatment.

What should I do if I think I have an STD?

Sometimes a person may be too scared or embarrassed to ask for information or help. But, keep in mind most STDs are easy to treat. Early treatment of STDs is important. The quicker you seek treatment, the less likely the STD will cause you severe harm. And the sooner you tell your sex partners about having an STD, the less likely they are to spread the disease to others (because they can get treated).

Doctors, local health departments, and STD and family planning clinics have information about STDs. The American Social Health Association (ASHA) has free information and keeps lists of clinics and doctors who provide treatment for STDs. Call ASHA at (800) 227-8922. You can get information from the phone line without leaving your name.

For More Information...

You can find out more about bacterial vaginosis (BV) by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (800) 994-9662 or the following organizations:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

National Prevention Information Network

Phone Number(s): (800) 458-5231

Internet Address: <http://www.cdcnpin.org>

CDC National STD and AIDS Hotline

Phone Number(s): (800) 227-8922

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org/NSTD/index.html>

National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/nchstp.html>

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

Phone Number(s): (301) 496-5717

Internet Address: <http://www.niaid.nih.gov>

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Clearinghouse

Phone Number(s): (800) 370-2943

Internet Address: <http://www.nichd.nih.gov>

American Social Health Association

Phone Number(s): (800) 783-9877

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org>

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

Phone Number(s): (800) 762-2264

Internet Address: <http://www.acog.org>

National Vaginitis Association

Phone Number(s) : (800) 428-6397

Internet Address : <http://www.vaginalinfections.com/>

American Academy of Family Physicians

Phone Number(s): (913) 906-6000

Internet Address: <http://www.familydoctor.org>

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Phone Number(s) (800) 230-7526

Internet Address: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

This FAQ was developed from fact sheets of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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October 2002*