



Bacterial Vaginosis

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis is a vaginal infection caused by an imbalance of bacteria. A woman's vagina normally contains many different kinds of bacteria. When the natural balance of those bacteria is disturbed, some types die off while others multiply, causing this condition. Men don't get bacterial vaginosis.

What causes bacterial vaginosis?

We're not sure what causes bacterial vaginosis. Anything that upsets the natural balance of bacteria in the vagina, such as douching, may play a part in the development of this infection. Bacterial vaginosis is also associated with having a new sex partner or multiple sex partners, although it's not clear why.

What are the symptoms of bacterial vaginosis?

Symptoms may include a gray vaginal discharge; a foul-smelling vaginal odor, especially after sex; itching and swelling of the vaginal area, and a burning sensation while urinating.

How will I know if I have bacterial vaginosis?

Your doctor or other health-care provider will collect a sample of the fluid in your vagina with a small swab during an internal (pelvic) exam and perform a few basic tests in the office.

How is bacterial vaginosis treated?

Your doctor may prescribe pills to re-balance the natural bacteria in the vagina.

What happens if bacterial vaginosis is left untreated?

If left untreated, bacterial vaginosis may increase a woman's risk of pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID often has no symptoms, but when symptoms are experienced, they may include lower belly pain; cramping; burning during urination; pain or bleeding during or after intercourse; unusual vaginal discharge; nausea and vomiting; and fever. If left untreated PID can make it difficult or impossible to get pregnant. It can also lead to "tubal" (ectopic) pregnancies and long-term pelvic pain. Bacterial vaginosis may also increase a person's chance of getting or spreading HIV if left untreated.

If you have symptoms of bacterial vaginosis, get examined and treated immediately to avoid any complications.

Do sex partners have to be treated?

Since men don't get bacterial vaginosis, male sex partners of women diagnosed with this infection do not need to be treated. Female sex partners of women with bacterial vaginosis may benefit from being examined.

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What if I'm pregnant?

Bacterial vaginosis can cause serious problems in pregnancy, including premature birth and serious infection of the mother's womb after delivery. Pregnant women with symptoms of the infection, and all pregnant women with a history of premature delivery should be tested for bacterial vaginosis at their first prenatal visit.

We don't think that bacterial vaginosis is sexually transmitted. However, all pregnant women should be tested for diseases that ARE sexually transmitted, including HIV, as early as possible in pregnancy. You should be tested again during your pregnancy if you or your partner engage in activities that increase your risk of getting a sexually transmitted disease (STD). For example, you are at higher risk for STDs if you have a new sex partner during pregnancy, or if you have more than one partner. If left untreated, STDs can be devastating for your baby. To protect yourself and your baby against HIV and other STDs, use a latex condom whenever you have sex.

How can I avoid bacterial vaginosis?

Since it's unclear what causes bacterial vaginosis, it's difficult to know how to prevent it. We recommend that all women avoid douching: it's not necessary, it's not an effective form of birth control, and it can lead to infections such as this one.

Infections that ARE sexually transmitted can be avoided by not having sex. *If you are sexually active*, you can reduce your risk of getting STDs, including HIV, by having sex only in a mutually monogamous relationship with a partner you are sure is not infected. If you are having sex outside of such a relationship, you can reduce your risk of STDs by:

- 1) *Always using a latex condom (or other type of latex barrier) whenever you have sex – vaginal, anal, or oral.* Condoms made of "natural" materials, such as lambskin, protect against pregnancy, but not against STDs. If you are allergic to latex, you can use condoms made of polyurethane or other synthetic materials.
- 2) *Limiting the number of people you have sex with.*
The more partners you have, the higher your risk.
- 3) *Avoiding alcohol and drugs when you have sex.* Drinking or getting high makes it much harder to remember to use condoms to protect yourself and others. For free, confidential help with a substance abuse problem, call 1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638), or just call 311.

More information

Free, confidential STD exams and treatment, and confidential or anonymous HIV counseling and testing, are available at Health Department clinics in all 5 boroughs of New York City. Health insurance, proof of citizenship, and parental consent are NOT required. For a list of clinics and hours, visit nyc.gov/health, or call 311.

