



What is Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)?

BV is the most common overgrowth that causes vaginal irritation. It is also the least understood and often is ignored or misdiagnosed.

What are the symptoms of BV?

Up to 50% of women with BV have no symptoms. Women with symptoms may notice:

- changes in vaginal discharge - colour, amount, or feel
- irritation of the vagina or outer genital area
- discomfort with intercourse
- discharge with a fishy smell that may be stronger after sex

What causes BV?

BV is not a sexually transmitted infection (STI). It's caused by an imbalance in the vagina. A healthy vagina has bacteria called lactobacillus. It balances the acid and base levels of the vagina. When these levels are unbalanced, other bacteria can overgrow and cause BV. The body sometimes needs help to restore the proper balance.

To lower the risk of developing an imbalance:

- limit the number of sex partners
- use condoms when having sex
- wipe from front to back (vagina to bum) after using the toilet
- avoid using scented personal hygiene and menstrual products
- do not douche
- change tampons often and use tampons appropriate for the amount of menstrual flow
- alternate using tampons with pads
- avoid wearing synthetic or thong-style underwear or tight garments
- try to manage stress
- eat well
- don't smoke

Do males get BV?

No. Women cannot pass the organisms that cause BV to male sex partners. They do not need to be treated. Studies of lesbian couples suggest that sexual transmission may happen between partners.

What testing is done?

It's possible to have more than one vaginal infection at a time. If you think you have BV, get checked by a healthcare provider. They can do a pelvic exam and take a sample of the discharge. The sample will be sent to a lab. Sometimes your healthcare provider can tell you at the time of the exam.

How is BV treated?

Treatment is not always needed. A woman does not need to be treated if she:

- isn't having symptoms
- isn't pregnant
- isn't having gynecological surgery
- has a normal pap smear

There are probiotic treatments available. Check with a health care provider.

Prescription treatments

There is an oral antibiotic called metronidazole (Flagyl). The dose is 2 pills, twice a day for a week. If you are pregnant, ask your doctor if you should use Flagyl. Studies show Flagyl is safe to use while pregnant, but most recommend waiting until after the 12th week before treating BV. If you are having an abortion, BV should be treated before having the procedure.

If you take birth control pills, use condoms for back up birth control or avoid having sex until your next period. Do not take this medicine when there is alcohol in your body. You may have a reaction that can include severe vomiting. Abstain from alcohol for 3 days before and 3 days after treatment.

Flagyl may cause a metallic taste in your mouth. This will go away when you finish the medication. The pharmacist will give you an information sheet when you get your prescription.

Flagyl is also available in a vaginal cream called Nidagel. You insert it once a day at bedtime for 5 nights or twice a day – in the morning and at bedtime - for 5 days. The cream has the same alcohol warning as the oral treatment. It is important to tell your health care provider if you are pregnant. If you have your period or it is due, wait until it is over before starting treatment.

There is another prescription treatment, an antibiotic vaginal cream called Dalacin. It has the antibiotic clindamycin in it. You insert an applicator filled with the cream into your vagina at bedtime for 7 nights. If you have your period or it is due, wait until your period is over before starting treatment.

Do not use Dalacin during early pregnancy if continuing the pregnancy. Let your health care provider know if you are pregnant, or breastfeeding, or taking other medications. The antibiotic is mixed with mineral oil. This can weaken latex. While you are being treated, take care not to rely on condoms, diaphragms, and cervical caps for birth control.

Complications of treatment:

Any antibiotic can affect the balance of bacteria in your vagina and cause a yeast overgrowth (often called a yeast infection). If you notice symptoms of yeast during or after antibiotic treatment, you can use an anti-yeast medication. WHC has a yeast overgrowth fact sheet with more information.

Please note treatment for BV is not always successful. For about 1 in every 5 women, BV comes back within a month of finishing treatment. You may need to be treated again with an antibiotic or use a probiotic according to directions.

Other issues:

There may be an association between BV and pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID is an infection of the uterus, tubes and ovaries. It can lead to infertility or a tubal pregnancy.

Infection with BV may increase risk of STI's like gonorrhoea or HIV. The exact relationship is unclear.

Summary:

BV is a common problem. It is often ignored or misdiagnosed. If you have any symptoms, see a healthcare provider for testing.

You should be treated if you:

- have symptoms
- are scheduled for gynecological surgery (like an abortion)
- are pregnant (after 12 weeks gestation)
- if you had an abnormal pap test result when you were tested

Want more information?

Visit these websites:

- www.cwhn.ca
- www.webmd.com
- www.4woman.org
- www.itsyoursexlife.com
- www.sexualityandu.ca
- www.womenshealthmatters.ca

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