

STD/STI INFORMATIONAL FACT SHEET

BACTERIAL VAGINOSIS (BAK-teer-yal VAJ-in-osis)

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is the name of a condition in women where the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina is disrupted and replaced by an overgrowth of certain bacteria causing an irritation of the vagina often associated with a vaginal discharge, odor, pain, itching, or burning.

How common is bacterial vaginosis?

Most women will get BV at some point in their reproductive years. It is the most common vaginal infection in women of childbearing age. However, women that have never had sexual intercourse are rarely affected. In the United States, as many as 16 percent of pregnant women have BV.

How is bacterial vaginosis transmitted?

The cause of BV is not fully understood and is not always due to sexual activity. BV is associated with an imbalance in the bacteria that are normally found in a woman's vagina. The vagina normally contains mostly "good" bacteria, and fewer "harmful" bacteria. BV develops when there is an increase in harmful bacteria. Not much is known about how women get BV. There are many unanswered questions about the role that harmful bacteria play in causing BV. Any woman can get BV. However, some activities or behaviors can upset the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina and put women at increased risk including: having a new sex partner or multiple sex partners, douching, and using an intrauterine device (IUD) for contraception.

Contrary to some beliefs, women do not get BV from toilet seats, bedding, swimming pools, or from touching objects around them.

What are the signs and symptoms of bacterial vaginosis?

Women with BV may have an abnormal vaginal discharge with an unpleasant, fish-like odor, especially after intercourse. Discharge, if present, is usually white or gray; it can be thin. Women with BV also may have burning during urination or itching around the outside of the vagina, or both. Some women with BV report no signs or symptoms at all.

What are complications of bacterial vaginosis?

In most cases, BV causes no complications. However, there can be some serious risks from BV that include increasing:

- a woman's susceptibility to HIV infection if she is exposed to the HIV virus.
- the chances that an HIV-infected woman can pass HIV to her sex partner.
- a woman's susceptibility to other STDs, such as Chlamydia and gonorrhea
- the possibilities that pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) may develop following surgical procedures such as a hysterectomy or an abortion.
- the risks for some complications during pregnancy.

How does bacterial vaginosis affect a pregnant woman and her baby?

The bacteria that cause BV can sometimes infect the uterus (womb) and fallopian tubes (tubes that carry eggs from the ovaries to the uterus). This type of infection is called pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID can cause infertility or damage the fallopian tubes enough to increase future risks for ectopic pregnancy and infertility. Ectopic pregnancy is a life-threatening condition in which a fertilized egg grows outside the uterus, usually in a fallopian tube which can rupture. Pregnant women with BV often have babies who are born premature or with low birth weight (less than 5 pounds).

How is bacterial vaginosis diagnosed?

A laboratory test on a sample of vaginal fluid can determine if BV is present.

How is bacterial vaginosis treated?

Although BV may clear up without treatment, all women with symptoms of BV should be treated to avoid such complications as PID. Male partners generally do not need to be treated. However, BV may spread between female sex partners.

Treatment is especially important for pregnant women. All pregnant women who have symptoms of BV should be checked and treated. Also, pregnant women who have ever had a premature delivery or low birth weight baby should be examined for BV, whether or not they show symptoms. Some physicians recommend that women undergoing a hysterectomy or abortion be treated for BV prior to the procedure, regardless of symptoms, to reduce their risk of developing PID.

BV is treatable with prescription antibiotics such as, metronidazole or clindamycin. Although each antibiotic can be used with nonpregnant or pregnant women, the recommended dosages differ for each. It is possible for BV to recur after treatment.

How can bacterial vaginosis be prevented?

BV is not completely understood by scientists, and the "best prevent methods" are unknown. However, it is known that BV is associated with having a new sex partner

or having multiple sex partners. It is seldom found in women who have never had intercourse.

The following basic prevention steps can help reduce the risk of upsetting the natural balance of bacteria in the vagina and developing BV:

- Be abstinent.
- Limit the number of sex partners.
- Do not douche.
- Use all of the medicine prescribed for treatment, even if the signs and symptoms of BV go away.

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For information about specific STDs/STIs, below are sources to use:

**Alan Guttmacher Institute
(AGI)**

120 Wall Street, 21st Floor
New York, NY 10005
Phone: 212/248-1111
Fax: 212/248-1951
<http://www.agi-usa.org>

1-800-243-7012 TTY
E-mail: info@cdcnpin.org

**The Henry J. Kaiser Family
Foundation**

2400 Sand Hill Road
Menlo Park, CA 94025
Phone: 650/854-9400
Fax: 650/854-4800
<http://www.kff.org>

**American Social Health
Association (ASHA)**

P. O. Box 13827
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-
3827
Phone: 800-783-9877
<http://www.ashastd.org/>

National Herpes Hotline (NHH)

Open from 9 A.M. to 7 P.M., ET,
Monday - Friday.
Phone: 919/361-8488

**Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention – Sexually Transmitted**

Disease - STD information and
referrals to STD Clinics
CDC-INFO
Phone: 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-
4636); TTY: 888-232-6348 In English,
en Espanol
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/default.htm>

**National HPV and Cervical
Cancer Prevention Hotline**

Open from 2 P.M. to 7 P.M., ET,
Monday - Friday.
Phone: 919/361-4848

**CDC National Prevention
Information Network (NPIN)**

P.O. Box 6003
Rockville, MD 20849-6003
Phone: 800-458-5231;
Fax: 888-282-7681

**Planned Parenthood Federation
of America**

434 West 33rd St.
New York, NY 10001
212/541-7800
FAX: 212/245-1845
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/>

**Sexuality Information and
Education Council of the United
States (SIECUS)**

130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350
New York, New York 10036-7802
Phone: 212/819-9770
Fax: 212/819-9776
<http://www.siecus.org>

Virginia Department of Health

109 Governor Street
Richmond, VA 23219
VIRGINIA STD/AIDS HOTLINE
Phone: 800-533-4148
<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/DiseasePrevention/factsheets.htm>