

Bacterial Vaginosis

General Information

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is a vaginal infection. It is the most common vaginal infection in women of childbearing age.

The direct cause of BV is not clear but it is linked to an imbalance of bacteria (germs) found in all women's vaginas.

Your vagina has both "good" and "harmful" bacteria present. Normally there are mostly good bacteria and few harmful bacteria. When something causes an increase in the harmful bacteria, you can develop BV.

Who is at Risk for BV

Any woman can develop BV, but some activities can upset the normal balance of bacteria in your vagina and put you at greater risk for the infection. These activities include:

- having a new sex partner or many sex partners
- douching.

BV can lead to complications (problems) and other health risks. BV bacteria can cause pelvic inflammatory disease, sometimes leading to infertility or ectopic pregnancy.

BV can increase your risk of an HIV infection if you are exposed to the virus. It can also increase your risk of getting sexually transmitted diseases.

How BV Spreads

There is not a lot of information about how BV spreads. It does appear that sexual activity plays a role in how women can get BV.

If you have a new sex partner or have had many sex partners you are more likely to develop BV.

BV is not spread by coming in contact with toilet seats, bedding, swimming pools, or objects close to these items.

Signs and Symptoms of BV

If you develop BV you may notice:

- an abnormal vaginal discharge with an unpleasant odor that may remind you of fish. The discharge may be white or gray and thin.
- a burning feeling when you urinate
- itching around the outside of your vagina.

Some women report they have no signs or symptoms with BV.

Detecting BV

To determine if you have BV, your health care provider will:

- examine your vagina for signs of BV
- test a sample of vaginal fluid for bacteria linked to BV.

Treating BV

- Your health care provider will prescribe a medicine for you, either metronidazole or clindamycin.
- BV can sometimes clear up without treatment, but taking the prescribed medicine will help prevent complications.
- BV can happen again after treatment.

Preventing BV

You can reduce the risk of upsetting the natural balance of bacteria in your vagina by:

- using condoms during sex
- limiting how many sex partners you have
- not douching.