

Bacterial Vaginosis

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is an infection in the vagina. BV is caused by changes in the amount of certain types of bacteria in your vagina. BV is the most common vaginal infection in women ages 15 to 44. BV is easily treatable with medicine from your doctor or nurse. If left untreated, it can raise your risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, genital herpes, chlamydia, and gonorrhea. Women with HIV who get BV are also more likely to pass HIV to a male sexual partner.

Q: How do you get BV?

A: Researchers are still studying how women get BV. You can get BV without having sex, but BV can also be caused by vaginal, oral, or anal sex. You can get BV from male or female partners.

You may be more at risk for BV if you:

- Have a new sex partner
- Have multiple sex partners
- Douche
- Do not use condoms
- Are pregnant. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 1 million pregnant women get BV each year. The risk for BV is higher for pregnant women because of the hormonal changes that happen during pregnancy.
- Are African-American. BV is twice as common in African-American women as in white women.
- Have an intrauterine device (IUD), especially if you also have irregular bleeding.

Q: What are the signs and symptoms of BV?

A: Many women have no signs or symptoms. If you do have symptoms, they may include:

- Unusual vaginal discharge. The discharge can be white (milky) or gray. It may also be foamy or watery. Some women report a strong fish-like odor, especially after sex.
- Burning when urinating
- Itching around the outside of the vagina
- Vaginal irritation

These symptoms may be similar to vaginal yeast infections and other health problems. Only your doctor or nurse can tell you for sure whether you have BV.

Q: What should I do if I have BV?

A: BV is easy to treat. If you think you have BV:

- See a doctor or nurse. Antibiotics will treat BV.
- Take all of your medicine. Even if symptoms go away, you need to finish all of the antibiotic.
- Tell any female sex partners so they can be treated. Male sex partners won't need to be treated.
- Avoid sexual contact until you finish your treatment.
- See your doctor or nurse again if you have symptoms that don't go away within a few days after finishing the antibiotic.

Q: How can I lower my risk of BV?

A: Steps you can take to lower your risk of BV include:

- **Help keep your vaginal bacteria balanced.** Use only warm water to clean the outside of your vagina. You do not need to use soap.

Even mild soap can cause infection or irritate your vagina. Always wipe front to back from your vagina to your anus.

- **Do not douche.** Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in your vagina that protect you from infection. Doctors do not recommend douching.
- **Practice safe sex.** The best way to prevent the spread of BV through sex is by not having sex. If you do have sex, you can lower your risk of getting BV, or any STI, with the following steps:
 - **Use condoms.** Condoms are the best way to prevent BV or STIs when you have sex. Make sure to put on the condom before the penis touches your vagina, mouth, or anus. Other methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms, will not protect you from STIs.
 - **Get tested.** Be sure you and your partner are tested for STIs. Talk to each other about your test results before you have sex.
 - **Be monogamous.** Having sex with just one partner can lower your risk. Be faithful to each other. That means that you only have sex with each other and no one else.
 - **Limit your number of sex partners.** Your risk of getting BV and STIs goes up with the number of partners you have.
 - **Don't abuse alcohol or drugs, which are linked to sexual risk taking.** Drinking too much alcohol or using drugs also puts you at risk of sexual assault and possible exposure to STIs.

For more information...

For more information about bacterial vaginosis, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention (NCHHSTP), CDC, HHS
800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists
202-638-5577 • www.acog.org/

American Sexual Health Association
919-361-8400 • www.ashastd.org/

Lesbian Health and Resource Center
415-502-5209

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