



# Bacterial Vaginosis

PATIENT EDUCATION SERIES

## What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is an overgrowth of several bacteria that normally exist in the vagina. It is the most common cause of vaginal discharge in women of childbearing age. Bacterial vaginosis is not a sexually transmitted infection.

## What are the symptoms of bacterial vaginosis?

Nearly half of all women with bacterial vaginosis will experience no symptoms at all. When a woman has symptoms, the most common complaint is a foul or “fishy” smelling vaginal odor. This odor frequently increases following intercourse. In a recent survey of medical providers, more than half said that the most common complaint from women with bacterial vaginosis is vaginal odor. Another common symptom is an excessive white or gray discharge with a milk-like consistency that can stain undergarments.

## What causes bacterial vaginosis?

The exact cause of bacterial vaginosis is unknown. There could be a variety of causes and no single organism causes it. The role of sexual activity in this process is not clear. It is a condition in which the natural balance of organisms found in the vagina changes. The healthy vagina normally contains a variety of bacteria. One kind of bacteria, known as *lactobacillus*, (lack-toe-bah-sillus) is particularly important. *Lactobacilli* keep the vagina slightly acidic to help reduce the growth of potentially harmful organisms. Women who have bacterial vaginosis lose this protection and have both a large increase in the number of potentially harmful bacteria and a large decrease in the numbers of normal, protective *lactobacilli* in their vagina. This change in numbers and kinds of bacteria is believed to be the cause of bacterial vaginosis. Risk factors for bacterial vaginosis include:

- Multiple or new sexual partners
- Douching
- Cigarette smoking

## How is bacterial vaginosis diagnosed?

Bacterial vaginosis is best diagnosed by seeing your provider for a pelvic exam, check of vaginal PH and microscopic exam of vaginal secretions. Self diagnosis can be difficult.

## How is bacterial vaginosis treated?

Your medical provider may prescribe either an oral or vaginal medication. It is important to take the medicine as directed and to abstain from sexual contact until the treatment is completed. Re-examination after treatment is not necessary unless symptoms recur.

## Does my partner need to be treated?

Partner treatment is not recommended as BV is not considered a sexually transmitted infection. There is no evidence that partner treatment will prevent recurrence/relapse.

## Are there any complications associated with bacterial vaginosis?

Although by itself BV is not harmful, it is associated with some health problems:

- Pregnant women with BV are at higher risk of pre-term delivery.
- Women with BV who undergo gynecologic surgery may be at higher risk of infection in the surgical site.
- BV increases the risk of acquiring HIV, genital herpes, gonorrhea, or chlamydia.

## What can I do to help prevent recurrences of bacterial vaginosis?

Many women will experience recurrences of BV. It is unclear why or how these recurrences or relapses occur, but they may be related to a lack of restoration of lactobacilli.

Here are a few recommendations to prevent recurrences:

- Do not douche. This may upset the normal vaginal balance.
- Limit the number of sexual partners, as women with multiple partners are at higher risk for BV as well as STIs.
- Finish the entire course of treatment.

If you have frequent recurrences, talk with your provider about either a prolonged course of treatment or a suppressive regimen.