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 people with vaginas who are of childbearing age.

What are the symptoms of bacterial vaginosis?

Nearly half of all people with bacterial vaginosis will experience no symptoms at all. When a person has symptoms, the most common complaint is a foul or “fishy” smelling vaginal odor. This odor frequently increases following intercourse. Another common symptom is an excessive amount of thin, white or gray discharge. Less commonly, there is itching. Pain during urination, painful intercourse, or swelling of the vulva are not associated with BV.

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. However, it is less commonly seen in women who have not engaged in sexual activity. 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, is particularly important. Lactobacilli keep the vagina slightly acidic to help reduce the growth of potentially harmful organisms. People 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 male or female 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 unreliable, and self treatment without an exam is not recommended.

How is bacterial vaginosis treated?

Your medical provider may prescribe either an oral or vaginal antibiotic. 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. 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 people with BV are at higher risk of preterm delivery.
- People 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 people 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 male or female partners are at higher risk for BV as well as STIs.
- Finish the entire course of treatment.
- Use of condoms and estrogen-containing contraceptives may be protective.

If you have frequent recurrences, talk with your provider about either a prolonged course of treatment or a suppressive regimen. Some small studies looking at the use of probiotics to restore the natural balance of bacteria in the vagina are promising. However, these have, yet, to be reproduced with larger sample sizes. Standardization of the probiotic products on the market is lacking. So, it is premature to recommend the use of probiotics at this time.