

Bacterial Vaginosis

Definition and Symptoms

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is the most common type of vaginal infection. It results not from yeast, but from a massive overgrowth of bacterial flora.

Up to one half of affected women have no symptoms but those that do usually complain of a thin milky discharge that may be itchy, irritating or accompanied by a foul smelling or "fishy" odor. Sometimes it is difficult for the individual to distinguish her symptoms from a yeast infection.

Causes and Risk Factors

The exact cause of bacterial vaginosis (BV) is unknown. There could be a variety of causes and no one organism causes it. We do know that healthy bacteria called lactobacillus that are normally present in the vagina and keep harmful bacterial organisms suppressed are for some reason reduced in numbers. Anaerobic and other bacteria, including Gardnerella take over and produce the amines that cause the odor. This imbalance leads to the development of bacterial vaginosis.

BV seems to occur more frequently in women with multiple partners or with new partners but is also seen in women who have never been sexually active. The odor may be worse after intercourse because semen, being alkaline, raises the pH of the vaginal contents - in this environment the anaerobic bacteria release more amines.

To make the diagnosis of BV, three of the following four criteria must be present:

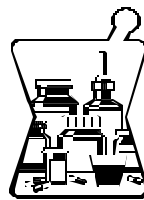
1. vaginal discharge (usually thin and milky)
2. pH > 4.5
3. positive "whiff" test
4. "clue cells" seen under the microscope

Complications

Complications of untreated BV include urinary tract and pelvic infections, early labor or miscarriage, post-surgical infections, and even infertility following serious infection in the tubes. A Swedish study suggested that BV may potentially be a cofactor with human papillomavirus (HPV) in the development of cervical intraepithelial neoplasia (CIN), which can lead to cervical cancer.

Treatment and Prevention

Treatment for BV is recommended to eliminate the discomfort and odor, and to prevent complications.



The usual treatment for BV is metronidazole taken orally as a pill or used vaginally as a cream. The most common side effect of the pills is a slight metallic taste in the mouth. Clindamycin tablets or vaginal cream are also effective.

It is very important **NOT TO CONSUME ALCOHOL** while being treated with metronidazole and for the following 48 hours. Doing so causes a very violent reaction including headache, flushing, nausea and vomiting.

It is not necessary for a male partner to be treated, although this is sometimes done if BV infections keep recurring.

It is also best not to douche at this time or any other time as this can upset the normal balance of vaginal organisms. Products like douches, deodorant sprays, and strong soaps also interfere with proper diagnosis, will not cure the condition, and usually make it worse.

For More Information

See your health care provider.

