
BACTERIAL VAGINOSIS

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis is a mild infection in the vagina caused by a type of bacteria (germ). The vagina normally contains a lot of “good” bacteria, called lactobacilli (say: “lack-toe-bah-sil-li”), and a few other types of bacteria, called anaerobes. Too many anaerobes (say: “ann-air-robess”) can cause bacterial vaginosis. We are unsure why anaerobe bacteria overgrowth occurs.

How do I know I have bacterial vaginosis?

You may notice a discharge from your vagina. The discharge may be clear or colored. It may be very light or heavy. It may have a fishy smell, especially after you have intercourse. Some women have bacterial vaginosis without any symptoms.

How can my clinician tell if I have bacterial vaginosis?

Your clinician will examine your vagina and use a cotton swab to get a sample of the discharge. This sample will be tested.

If this is an infection, did I catch it from someone?

Not necessarily. Bacterial vaginosis is an overgrowth of bacteria that are normally in the vagina. While it's more common in women who are sexually active, it also occurs in women who are not sexually active. It's not usually necessary for your sex partner to be treated.

Does it have to be treated?

Yes. If the infection is not treated, the bacteria may get up into the uterus or the fallopian tubes and cause more serious infections. Treating bacterial vaginosis lowers this risk. Treatment is especially important in pregnant women.

How is bacterial vaginosis treated?

The most common treatment is with metronidazole (Flagyl) or clindamycin, requiring a prescription. They are available both as an oral tablet and a vaginal gel. Both treatments are effective, curing 80-95% of women. Check with your healthcare provider before taking these and other medications if you are pregnant.

Metronidazole pills, while less expensive, may cause stomach upset and leave a metallic taste in the mouth. Both forms of metronidazole, the oral medicine and the vaginal gel, interact with alcohol, potentially causing severe nausea, vomiting, and abdominal cramping. It is very important to **avoid alcohol** during your treatment with metronidazole (Flagyl) and for 24 hours afterwards.

Vaginal gels can weaken the rubber in condoms, diaphragms, cervical caps, and dental dams. Also, continued vaginal irritation can interfere with the healing process. Therefore, it is recommended that you abstain from sex during treatment

Can it recur?

Bacterial vaginosis can recur. Practicing safer sex can help prevent your chances of recurrence or exposure to other infections. If your symptoms return (discharge, odor, or mild itching) make an appointment to see your clinician for further treatment recommendations.

Check our website: www.uhs.berkeley.edu to learn more about this medical concern or others.