Bacterial Vaginosis – CDC Fact Sheet

Any woman can get bacterial vaginosis. Having bacterial vaginosis can increase your chance of getting an STD.

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is an infection caused when too much of certain bacteria change the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina.

How common is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis is the most common vaginal infection in women ages 15-44.

How is bacterial vaginosis spread?

We do not know about the cause of BV or how some women get it. BV is linked to an imbalance of "good" and "harmful" bacteria that are normally found in a woman's vagina.

We do know that having a new sex partner or multiple sex partners and douching can upset the balance of bacteria in the vagina and put women at increased risk for getting BV.

However, we do not know how sex contributes to BV. BV is not considered an STD, but having BV can increase your chances of getting an STD. BV may also affect women who have never had sex.

You cannot get BV from toilet seats, bedding, or swimming pools.

How can I avoid getting bacterial vaginosis?

Doctors and scientists do not completely understand how BV is spread, and there are no known best ways to prevent it.

The following basic prevention steps may help lower your risk of developing BV:

- Not having sex;
- Limiting your number of sex partners; and
- Not douching.

I'm pregnant. How does bacterial vaginosis affect my baby?

Pregnant women can get BV. Pregnant women with BV are more likely to have babies who are born premature (early) or with low birth weight than women who do not have BV while pregnant. Low birth weight means having a baby that weighs less than 5.5 pounds at birth.

Treatment is especially important for pregnant women.

National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention
Division of STD Prevention

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How do I know if I have bacterial vaginosis?

Many women with BV do not have symptoms. If you do have symptoms, you may notice a thin white or gray vaginal discharge, odor, pain, itching, or burning in the vagina. Some women have a strong fish-like odor, especially after sex. You may also have burning when urinating; itching around the outside of the vagina, or both.

How will my doctor know if I have bacterial vaginosis?

A health care provider will look at your vagina for signs of BV and perform laboratory tests on a sample of vaginal fluid to determine if BV is present.

Can bacterial vaginosis be cured?

BV will sometimes go away without treatment. But if you have symptoms of BV you should be checked and treated. It is important that you take all of the medicine prescribed to you, even if your symptoms go away. A health care provider can treat BV with antibiotics, but BV can recur even after treatment. Treatment may also reduce the risk for STDs.

Male sex partners of women diagnosed with BV generally do not need to be treated. However, BV may be transferred between female sex partners.

What happens if I don't get treated?

BV can cause some serious health risks, including

- Increasing your chance of getting HIV if you have sex with someone who is infected with HIV;
- If you are HIV positive, increasing your chance of passing HIV to your sex partner;
- Making it more likely that you will deliver your baby too early if you have BV while pregnant;
- Increasing your chance of getting other STDs, such as chlamydia and gonorrhea. These bacteria can sometimes cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), which can make it difficult or impossible for you to have children.

Where can I get more information?

Division of STD Prevention (DSTDP)
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/std

CDC-INFO Contact Center
1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)
Contact www.cdc.gov/info

CDC National Prevention Information Network (NPIN)
http://www.cdcnpin.org/scripts/index.asp
P.O. Box 6003
Rockville, MD 20849-6003
E-mail: info@cdcnpin.org

American Sexual Health Association (ASHA)
http://www.ashastd.org/
P.O. Box 13827
Research Triangle Park,
NC 27709-3827
1-800-783-9877