

Bacterial Vaginosis

Several types of vaginal infections can occur in sexually active women and girls. The most common is bacterial vaginosis, which causes an abnormal odor and fluid or discharge coming from the vagina. Other causes of vaginal infection are possible as well. Testing by your doctor can identify the cause of the infection and the most effective treatment.

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis is the most common vaginal infection in teenage girls and women. These infections occur more often in sexually active women and girls, although they can occur in sexually inactive females. The main symptom is an abnormal discharge from the vagina.

Bacterial vaginosis clears up rapidly with treatment. However, there are numerous causes of vaginal infection, including infections with yeast (*Candida*) and sexually transmitted diseases. The doctor can make the diagnosis by looking at a sample of the vaginal discharge under the microscope. Since other infections may be present (for example, gonorrhea or infection with the bacteria *Chlamydia*), your doctor may recommend additional tests.

What does it look like?

The main symptoms of bacterial vaginosis are:

- Whitish-gray fluid coming from the vagina.
- Abnormal odor from the vagina, sometimes described as a “fishy” smell. The odor may be more noticeable after sexual activity.

Other types of infections may cause different symptoms. For example:

- Infection with the parasite *Trichomonas* may cause a larger amount of yellowish discharge.
- Yeast (*Candida*) infections may cause pain or itching with a white, creamy discharge.

What causes bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis is caused by abnormal growth of certain bacteria. Several types of bacteria are normally present in the vagina. Bacterial vaginosis occurs when the normal balance among these bacteria is disrupted. Although bacterial vaginosis isn't always spread or contracted by sex, it usually occurs in sexually active women.

- Other vaginal infections may be caused by bacteria (such as *Chlamydia*) or by the parasite *Trichomonas*. These infections are transmitted only by having sexual relations. Yeast infections can also occur.

What are some possible complications of bacterial vaginosis?

- Bacterial vaginosis has been linked to a more serious infection deeper inside the reproductive system, including the uterus (womb), ovaries, and ovarian tubes. This is called pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), and it may lead to an increased risk of infertility. Teenage girls are at highest risk of PID.
- Irregular menstrual periods.
- In pregnant women, an increased risk of premature labor or ruptured membranes.

What increases your risk of bacterial vaginosis?

- Having a new sexual partner, or having more than one sexual partner.
- Douching.

Can bacterial vaginosis be prevented?

- If you are sexually active, limit the number of sexual partners.
- Use a condom every time you have sex.

How is bacterial vaginosis treated?

Any time you have symptoms of bacterial vaginosis or any type of vaginal infection (abnormal fluid or odor coming from the vagina, itching), seek medical care. To ensure proper treatment, it's important for the doctor to identify the cause of the infection.

- *Antibiotics* are needed to kill the germs that are causing the infection. Flagyl (generic name: metronidazole) is the most commonly used drug. It can be used as a cream placed in the vagina or as a pill. A single oral dose can be used but is less effective than a 7-day course of pills.
- Make sure to finish your antibiotic prescription, even if your symptoms have gotten better. Stopping treatment too early may allow the infection to come back.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if your symptoms (vaginal fluid or odor, itching, or pain) do not get better with treatment or if they return after treatment.

