

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, and a few other types of bacteria, called anaerobes. Too many anaerobes can cause bacterial vaginosis.

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. Some women have bacterial vaginosis without any symptoms.

How can my doctor tell if I have bacterial vaginosis?

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

What causes bacterial vaginosis?

We don't know why the anaerobe bacteria overgrow and cause this infection.

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

No. Bacterial vaginosis is an overgrowth of bacteria that are normally in the vagina in small numbers. While it's more common in women who are sexually active, it also occurs in women who are not sexually active. It's not always necessary for your sex partner to be treated.

If this is just a mild infection, does it have to be treated?

Yes. If the infection isn't 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?

It can be treated in one of several ways. Your doctor may prescribe pills for you to take by mouth, or a cream or gel to put in your vagina. It's important to use your medicine exactly as your doctor tells you.

If your doctor prescribes metronidazole (brand name: Flagyl) or other medicines, don't drink any alcohol while taking the medicine or for 24 hours afterward. Alcohol plus these medicines can cause nausea and vomiting. Even the small amount of alcohol in many cough syrups can cause nausea and vomiting if you're taking metronidazole. Also, be sure to tell your doctor about any other medicines you are currently taking.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

Visit familydoctor.org for more useful information on this and many other health-related topics.

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