



Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) Fact Sheet

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is the name of a condition in women where the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina is changed. “Good” bacteria are replaced by an overgrowth of certain other bacteria. It is sometimes accompanied by discharge, odor, pain, itching, or burning.

How do women get BV?

Not much is known about how women get BV. BV can develop when the balance of “good” and “harmful” bacteria in a woman’s vagina changes. Any woman can get BV. Douching and having new or multiple sex partners can increase the risk of BV. It is not clear how sexual activity leads to BV.

Women do not get BV from toilet seats, bedding, swimming pools, or from touching objects around them. Women who have never had sexual intercourse may also be affected.

What are the symptoms of BV?

Women with BV may have an abnormal vaginal discharge with an unpleasant odor. Some women report a strong fish-like odor, especially after sex. Discharge, if present, is usually white or gray and can be thin. Women with BV may also have burning during urination or itching around the outside of the vagina, or both. However, most women with BV report no signs or symptoms at all.

How long can bacterial vaginosis be spread?

BV does not usually spread to male sex partners. BV can spread between female sex partners. BV can spread until it is adequately treated.

How does BV affect a pregnant woman and her baby?

Pregnant women with BV more often have babies who are born premature or with low birth weight (low birth weight is less than 5.5 pounds).

The bacteria that cause BV can sometimes infect the uterus (womb) and fallopian tubes (tubes that carry eggs from the ovaries to the uterus). This type of infection is called pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID can damage women’s reproductive organs – which can be dangerous.

PID can cause infertility or damage the fallopian tubes enough to increase the future risk of ectopic pregnancy and infertility. Ectopic pregnancy is a life-threatening condition in which a fertilized egg grows outside the uterus, usually in a fallopian tube (which can burst).

What is the treatment for bacterial vaginosis?

BV is treatable with the right medicine (antibiotics) from your provider. Women with BV who are HIV-positive should receive the same treatment as those who are HIV-negative. Women can get BV again after treatment. If this happens, talk to your provider.

Can bacterial vaginosis be prevented?

BV is not completely understood by scientists. The best ways to prevent BV are not known. We know BV is associated with new or multiple sex partners. BV is not usually found in women who have never had sex.

Get yourself tested for STDs if you are at risk. Anyone in Illinois who is 12 or older can get tested without their parents’ consent.