

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis is caused by an overgrowth of bacteria (bugs) that are normally only present in the vagina in small numbers.

What are the symptoms of bacterial vaginosis?

Many women do not have any symptoms but some experience an increase in vaginal discharge and an unpleasant odour.

How is bacterial vaginosis diagnosed?

During a medical examination, the doctor or nurse will take a sample of vaginal discharge and this is examined under a microscope to make the diagnosis. Results of the test will be available before you leave the sexual health clinic and a treatment could be prescribed. Other infections may be present at the same time as bacterial vaginosis, so it is important to take tests to rule out sexually transmitted infections as well.

How is bacterial vaginosis treated?

Treatment is usually metronidazole antibiotic tablets, taken for seven days. Metronidazole may cause nausea or an upset stomach; these effects can be reduced by taking the tablets with meals. Do not drink alcohol during treatment or you may get a severe hangover.

How did I get bacterial vaginosis?

The exact cause of bacterial vaginosis is not known and it is not clear whether bacterial vaginosis is sexually transmitted. However, it is more common in women with more than one sexual partner, and often develops after intercourse with a new partner. Bacterial vaginosis is also more common in women who have sex with other women and women who use soapy water or other products to clean out the inside of the vagina.

What are the risks of bacterial vaginosis?

Most women do not suffer from any complications. However, in certain circumstances BV is associated with pregnancy complications, pelvic infection and other sexually transmitted infections.

Can bacterial vaginosis come back and how can this be prevented?

Return of symptoms is common, and sometimes a longer course of treatment is required to reduce the chance of symptoms returning. Treating the male partner of an infected woman does not seem to prevent recurrences so is not recommended. However, we recommend using condoms for at least one month after treating BV (even if you only have sex with your regular male partner) as this seems to reduce the chances of recurrence. Condoms also protect against sexually transmitted infections.

This fact sheet is designed to provide you with information on disease. It is not intended to replace the need for a consultation with your doctor. All clients are strongly advised to check with their doctor about any specific questions or concerns they may have. Every effort has been taken to ensure that the information in this pamphlet is correct at the time of publishing (2015).

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