

BACTERIAL VAGINOSIS (BV)

WHAT IS BV?

The healthy vagina contains many different types of bacteria, which are important in fighting infections. In BV, there is a change in the normal balance of vaginal bacteria, which can result in an unpleasant odour and/or discharge in some women. However, the actual cause of BV remains unclear and is the subject of current research studies.

HOW DO YOU GET BV?

Women who are sexually active appear much more likely to get BV. The problem is that we don't know if BV is actually transmitted through sex, or whether it is sexual activity itself that disturbs the healthy balance of vaginal bacteria causing BV.

Studies have shown that certain practices are associated with the development of BV. For instance douching, or cleaning inside the vagina with soap or other products has been associated with BV in women. Research also shows that BV may occur in some women after a change of sexual partner, engaging in sex work, or having a female sexual partner. Obviously not all women with BV will have engaged in these practices, and how these practices cause BV is still unclear. Importantly, there is insufficient evidence to help us advise you whether avoiding these practices or using condoms will protect you against BV.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Up to 50% of women will notice an unpleasant vaginal odour or discharge. However, BV may not cause any symptoms.

HOW DO YOU TEST FOR BV?

A cotton swab is inserted into the vagina and the vaginal discharge is smeared onto a glass slide and examined under a microscope.

HOW IS BV TREATED?

BV is usually treated with an anti-infective tablet called metronidazole (flagyl) or a vaginal antibiotic cream called clindamycin (Dalacin V) for 7 days.

While these treatments are effective in the short term, many women experience a recurrence of BV within a year of treatment. We do not know why recurrence is so common after treatment.

ARE THERE ANY COMPLICATIONS IF BV IS NOT TREATED?

BV is a common condition and many women with BV do not suffer from any complications. However, BV can cause miscarriage, premature delivery and low birth weight of infants, and can predispose women to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) and increase their risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection.

WILL IT RECUR?

Nearly half the women who are treated for BV experience recurrence. If you develop symptoms after treatment please see a doctor.

HOW CAN I AVOID GETTING BV?

Currently we cannot tell women what to do to avoid getting BV. We advise all women to practice safe sex as a general principle, but whether it will protect you against BV is not known.

This fact sheet is designed to provide you with information on Bacterial Vaginosis. 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 printing.