

Bacterial vaginosis

Bacterial vaginosis is a condition that occurs when the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina becomes disrupted. This can result in an over-growth of certain bacteria which is often accompanied by unpleasant symptoms.

Women with bacterial vaginosis may be at increased risk of infection by HIV. There is also good evidence that HIV-positive women who have bacterial vaginosis when they give birth are at greater risk of passing on HIV to their baby.

Causes of bacterial vaginosis

A common cause of bacterial vaginosis is washing the vagina (douching). Douching too frequently or with too much soap can upset the balance of bacteria. The use of spermicides, or strongly scented soaps and wearing tight, non-absorbent underwear, have also been associated with an increased risk of bacterial vaginosis.

Although this condition is sometimes referred to as a sexually transmitted infection, and it is a very common condition amongst women attending sexual health clinics, this classification is not, strictly speaking, correct. You do not 'catch' bacterial vaginosis as it is not caused by particular bacteria that are usually transmitted sexually, such as gonorrhoea or chlamydia (see InfoVIHtal #37: Chlamydia and InfoVIHtal #44 Gonorrhoea). However, having a new sexual partner, or multiple sexual partners, can increase the risk of developing bacterial vaginosis.

Symptoms

Most part of women with bacterial vaginosis show no symptoms at all. When they do occur, symptoms can include a grey or whitish discharge from the vagina that can have a strong, unpleasant smell. Other symptoms can include itching around the vagina and a burning pain after passing water.

If left untreated, bacterial vaginosis can cause more serious symptoms and even lead to infertility or a potentially serious condition called pelvic inflammatory disease (PID).

Diagnosis

A general sexual health screen includes tests for bacterial vaginosis. A doctor or a nurse will examine you to look for signs of this condition and other sexually transmitted infections (STI). It is likely that a swab will be taken from the vagina and will be examined under a microscope to see if you have bacterial vaginosis or any other infection.

Sexual health screens are free and confidential. You can go to public STI clinics or to a primary care centre (CAP, in Spanish) so your GP can refer you to those clinics. Also, it is possible that sexual health screens are provided in infectious diseases units of some hospitals.

If you are pregnant, you should be screened for bacterial vaginosis and STI as part of your routine care.

Bacterial vaginosis and health complications

Having bacterial vaginosis can increase the chances that a woman will become infected with HIV if she is exposed to the virus. Women with bacterial vaginosis may be more likely to pass on HIV to an HIV-negative partner during sex. There is also evidence that HIV-positive women with bacterial vaginosis have a greater risk of infecting their baby during delivery.

Untreated bacterial vaginosis has also been linked to a higher risk of premature delivery and later infertility. Pelvic inflammatory disease, which is potentially very serious, can also occur if bacterial vaginosis is left untreated.

Treatment

Although bacterial vaginosis can go away by itself as the balance of bacteria in the vagina corrects naturally, it is important that HIV-positive women who believe that they may have the condition are screened for it and, if necessary, take treatment. It is particularly important that women who are pregnant or thinking about pregnancy are examined and get treatment if necessary (see InfoVIHtal #41 Pregnancy and contraception).

Treatment is with antibiotics. Metronidazole can be used as an oral treatment. Usually treatment lasts for seven days and consists of twice-daily doses of 400mg of this drug. An alternative oral metronidazole treatment is a single 2g dose. Another possible treatment is a single 2g antibiotic gel, which is put into the vagina. Metronidazole is available in a gel formulation, as is an antibiotic called clindamycin. It's important that you take all the treatment prescribed to you.

Bacterial vaginosis can recur after treatment, so you may need another course of treatment at a later date.