

# Bacterial vaginosis

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## **What is bacterial vaginosis (BV)?**

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is a common condition, only affecting women, in which the balance of bacteria inside the vagina becomes disrupted.

## **What is the cause of BV?**

The cause of BV is not clear. The vagina naturally contains bacteria that keep the environment mildly acidic. If these bacteria are disrupted, then it allows other (bad) bacteria to grow so affecting the natural chemistry of the vaginal fluid.

BV is not a sexually transmitted infection (STI), but there is a higher risk of getting BV if you're having sex.

Other things that can increase your risk of developing BV are:

- Scented soaps or bubble baths
- Having an intrauterine device (IUD) fitted
- Using vaginal deodorant
- Vaginal douching (washing or cleaning out the inside of the vagina with water or other mixtures of fluids)

## **How common is it?**

It is estimated one in ten women will get BV at some point in the life. Any woman can get it, including women who have same sex partners.

## **What are the signs and symptoms of BV?**

The main symptom of BV is an unusual vaginal discharge, which:

- Has a strong fishy smell, particularly after sex
- Is white or grey
- Tends to be thin and watery

About 50% of women with BV have no symptoms.

BV isn't serious for the vast majority of women, although it can be a concern if symptoms develop in pregnancy.

## **Does untreated BV affect pregnancy?**

BV causes no problems in the vast majority of pregnancies, but there is a small risk of miscarriage or premature birth. This risk is more significant for women who have had these complications in the past.

Contact your GP or Sexual Health Sheffield if you're pregnant and you begin to have vaginal discharge (although discharge can be a normal part of pregnancy).

## **What is the test for BV?**

BV can usually be diagnosed after an internal examination of your vagina. A swab will be taken of the vaginal fluid and analysed in the laboratory.

## **Where can I get tested?**

From Sexual Health Sheffield; all tests and treatments are free. Commercial home testing kits are also available from pharmacists.

## **What is the treatment for BV?**

BV can usually be successfully treated with:

- Usually a single dose of antibiotics, or
- A course of antibiotic tablets taken twice a day for five to seven days, or
- An antibiotic gel applied inside your vagina

It is quite common for BV to return. Talk to staff at Sexual Health Sheffield if you have concerns about this.

BV can also clear up with no treatment at all.

## **Can I still have sex?**

Although BV is not sexually transmitted, it is sometimes associated with sex because contact with semen and/or saliva can disturb the natural environment in the vagina, allowing BV to develop in some women. Using a condom for penetrative sex can offer protection against BV as well as STIs.

(Remember that lots of other infections can be sexually transmitted - using condoms can help prevent STIs.)

## **How can I help prevent BV?**

Some women experience recurrent symptoms of BV.

The best ways of preventing BV are not known, but avoiding anything that would upset the natural environment in the vagina may help. For example:

- Douching
- Over-washing
- Bubble baths, scented soaps / gels, antiseptics. We advise soap substitutes such as aqueous cream for the genital area

as well as:

- Use a condom for penetrative sex
- Cover sex toys with condoms before use. Remove the condom and replace it with a new one before sharing the toy with your partner. Wash or sterilise sex toys as appropriate after each use

## How can I protect myself from sexually transmitted infections?

The following measures can help protect you from sexually transmitted infections including HIV and chlamydia. If you have a sexually transmitted infection, they will also help prevent you from passing it on to your partner(s):

- Use condoms every time you have vaginal or anal sex
- If you have oral sex, use a condom to cover the penis, or a dam to cover the anus or female genitals
- Any genital to genital contact between partners could pass on STIs. Using dams or condoms before sexual contact can help prevent infection
- If you are not sure how to use condoms correctly visit **[www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk](http://www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk)**
- Avoid sharing sex toys. If you do share them, wash or sterilise them or cover them with a new condom before anyone else uses them
- Arrange regular HIV/STI check-ups, especially at change / start of relationships with new sexual partners

## What happens at Sexual Health Sheffield?

When you attend for your appointment, you will be asked to provide the following:

- Your name and how we can contact you; any details you provide will be treated confidentially
- During your visit you will be asked personal information so we can provide the relevant and appropriate care
- We have a duty of care to all our patients, so if you are 17 or under you will be asked relevant questions to assess your safety. If staff are concerned, they may talk to you about what to do about this and may contact other appropriate agencies. Sexual Health

Sheffield will not tell your parents or carers that you have visited Sexual Health Sheffield

This is the service you can expect when you attend Sexual Health Sheffield:

- All advice, information, tests, contraception, condoms and treatments are free at Sexual Health Sheffield
- No one should judge you because of your sexual behaviour or lifestyle
- All our services are confidential
- All Sexual Health Sheffield workers are appropriately and fully trained NHS staff
- All tests are optional; no examination will take place without your permission
- Please ask questions to ensure you fully understand what services have been offered, what tests carried out and what treatments given
- You can have a chaperone to help you feel more comfortable; please ask
- Our friendly and professional staff are here to help you. We will give you as much support as you need (particularly if you need help on how to inform any partners)

If you feel that we have not met the above or want to give us any other feedback, please contact us via

**[www.sth.nhs.uk/patients/tell-us-what-you-think](http://www.sth.nhs.uk/patients/tell-us-what-you-think)**

## Further information

- [www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk](http://www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk)
- 0114 226 8888

NHS Choices website

- [www.nhs.uk/conditions/sexually-transmitted-infections](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sexually-transmitted-infections)



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