



Bacterial Vaginosis

Bacterial vaginosis is caused by excessive growth of bacteria that may normally be present in the vagina. When these bacteria are present in large numbers, they may cause symptoms such as a discharge or odour. One such bacterium is *Gardnerella vaginalis*, hence another common name for the condition: Gardnerella vaginitis.

Symptoms

Normal vaginal secretions may change to a watery, pearly grey discharge. There may be a strong odour from the vagina, and the smell may be worse after unprotected sex. However, these symptoms are not always present.

A woman has bacterial vaginosis only if she has:

- overgrowth of vaginal bacteria and

- vaginal discharge or odour

If both are present, treatment is required.

Diagnosis

During a medical examination, the doctor may notice a discharge and/or odour (sometimes, even when the woman has not noticed any symptoms). The vaginal fluid may be more alkaline than usual.

Swabs taken from the vagina during the examination may show many bacteria resembling Gardnerella.

Transmission

It is not clear whether bacterial vaginosis is sexually transmitted, but it can be associated with other sexually transmitted diseases. It is more common in women with multiple sexual partners and it often develops soon after intercourse with a new partner. Bacterial vaginosis is relatively common among women with female partners, where the condition may be triggered by the insertion of fingers or shared sex toys.

There is no condition equivalent to bacterial vaginosis in men. Bacterial vaginosis can occur in monogamous relationships, and it can occur even when the woman's partners always use condoms.

So, it seems that a sexual partner doesn't 'give' a woman bacterial vaginosis, but it occurs as a result of sexual contact.

Treatment

If a woman has no symptoms, usually no treatment is required, even if Gardnerella is present in the vagina.

Treatment may be necessary when:

- the woman has symptoms, or the doctor has noticed signs of bacterial vaginosis and bacteria including Gardnerella are present,
- the woman is about to have a medical procedure which could allow bacteria into the uterus,
- the woman is pregnant (in this case, an obstetrician may need to be consulted about treatment).

Metronidazole

Treatment is usually metronidazole (Flagyl) tablets, taken for five days.

Do not drink alcohol during treatment or for 3 days afterwards, or you may get a severe hangover.

Metronidazole may cause nausea or an upset stomach. Taking the tablets after meals can reduce these effects.

Some people notice an unusual taste in the mouth while taking metronidazole. This taste resolves when the antibiotic course is completed.

Other treatments

If someone is unable to take metronidazole, other treatments are available. These may not be as effective as metronidazole, but usually have fewer side effects.

Tinidazole (Fasigyn) tablets are taken as a single dose. The side effects may be similar to those of metronidazole.

Clindamycin (Dalacin V) vaginal cream is available from pharmacies with a prescription. This cream is used nightly for 7 days.

Miconazole (Monistat) vaginal pessaries are an effective treatment for vaginal thrush, but also have some activity against bacterial vaginosis. They are available from Clinic 275 or from pharmacies without a prescription. Insert one pessary each night for 7 nights.

Aci-jel vaginal cream alters the acidity of the vagina, making it more difficult for bacterial vaginosis organisms to multiply. This cream is available from pharmacies without a prescription.



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Sexually Transmitted Diseases Services

Royal Adelaide Hospital

Free and confidential advice, testing and treatment for all STDs including HIV/AIDS

No appointment necessary

Monday, Thursday & Friday

10am – 4.30pm

Tuesday & Wednesday

12 noon – 7pm

1st floor
275 North Terrace
Adelaide 5000

Telephone

08 8226 6025

Toll free country call
1800 806 490

email

std.services@dhs.sa.gov.au

web site

www.stdservices.on.net

clinic

Recurrences

If the symptoms of bacterial vaginosis return within a few weeks of treatment, it may mean the original infection is active again. A recurrence several months after treatment may be due to reinfection.

Some women experience repeated cases of bacterial vaginosis. The reason for this is not known, and there is no known treatment for eradicating the condition. Sometimes changing from one treatment to another (eg. from metronidazole to clindamycin) is helpful.

Treating the partner of an infected woman does not seem to prevent recurrences.

Prevention

It is not clear how women get bacterial vaginosis. While some cases occur without sexual exposure, most cases appear to be associated with sexual activity.

Although no infection like bacterial vaginosis is found in men, using condoms may provide some protection because semen may make the vagina more alkaline. Condoms will also protect against other sexually transmitted infections.

Any sex toys which are inserted into the vagina should not be shared.

More Information

STD Services web site:
www.stdservices.on.net/std/bacterial_vaginosis

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