**Bacterial Vaginosis Symptoms**

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**BACTERIAL VAGINOSIS**

Up to 75% of women will experience an inflammatory condition of the [vagina](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=5951) at some point in their lives. Medically known as [vaginitis](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=59337), inflammation in the vaginal area is a common condition resulting from multiple causes. Two of the most common causes of vaginitis are [yeast infection](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=79869) and bacterial vaginosis.

Bacterial vaginosis refers to an overgrowth of certain types of [bacteria](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=13954) that are normally present in the vagina and is not a [sexually-transmitted infection](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=58875) (STD). The condition used to be referred to as *Gardnerella* vaginitis; because *Gardnerella* is a type of bacteria that sometimes causes the infection. While symptoms are not present in about half of women with bacterial vaginosis, those who do experience symptoms will have [vaginal discharge](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=53355), usually with an unpleasant odor. The discharge is usually gray to white in color but can be of any color.

Bacterial vaginosis is a vaginal condition that results from an overgrowth of normal [bacteria](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=13954) in the [vagina](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=5951). There are a number of species of bacteria that naturally live in the vagina and can grow to excess to cause **bacterial vaginosis**. As a result of overgrowth of certain bacteria, a [vaginal discharge](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=105575) may result.

**Bacterial Vaginosis Causes**

The reasons for overgrowth of certain types of bacteria in the vagina or an imbalance in the growth of these bacteria are not fully understood. However, certain factors can increase a woman's risk of developing bacterial vaginosis, including:

* having multiple sex partners,
* having a female sex partner, and
* [tobacco smoking](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=58939).

Vaginal [douching](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=3111) may also increase the risk of developing bacterial vaginosis.

While the condition is more common in women with multiple sex partners, it is not believed to be contagious or entirely related to sexual activity since it is the result of overgrowth or imbalance in the bacteria normally present in the vagina. Moreover, women who have not had sexual activity can develop bacterial vaginosis.

**Bacterial Vaginosis Symptoms**

Vaginal discharge, often with a foul-smelling odor, is typically the only symptom of bacterial vaginosis. The discharge has been described a thin and gray to white in color. It is difficult to determine how much discharge represents an abnormal amount, since all women can have varying amounts of vaginal discharge. In general, any discharge that is in excess of normal for a particular woman can be regarded as abnormal. Many women with bacterial vaginosis have no symptoms at all.

**When to Seek Medical Care**

If you experience an unusual or excessive vaginal discharge, a visit to your healthcare practitioner is recommended so that more serious conditions can be ruled out, such as infection with [chlamydia](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=58861) or [gonorrhea](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=58869). The unpleasant symptoms of bacterial vaginosis also can be effectively treated.

**Exams and Tests**

The [medical history](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=3768) and physical examination are the first steps in helping to distinguish bacterial vaginosis from more serious conditions.

After taking a medical history, the healthcare practitioner will perform a [pelvic exam](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=10977). During the exam, the healthcare practitioner will observe the vaginal lining and [cervix](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=2686) and will perform a manual examination of the ovaries and [uterus](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=5918). Also during the exam, the healthcare practitioner may collect samples for examination under a microscope or for culture studies to rule out the presence of sexually transmitted infections (STDs).

**Bacterial Vaginosis Treatment**

The patient should always take the full course of antibiotic (see below) that has been prescribed, even if the symptoms disappear. With proper treatment, the symptoms usually resolve in a few days, but it is still necessary to take the entire course of antibiotic treatment. Medical treatment for bacterial vaginosis involves [antibiotics](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=58694) taken either orally or applied locally to the vagina. Since bacterial vaginosis is not believed to be a sexually transmitted condition, treatment of male sex partners is typically not necessary.

**Follow-up**

A return visit to a healthcare practitioner is recommended if the patient's symptoms do not resolve after antibiotic treatment or if symptoms return. Recurrent bacterial vaginosis may develop in the same woman after she has been treated, so it is important to see a healthcare practitioner if symptoms persist or recur. Up to 50% of women who are treated will develop a recurrence of symptoms in the year following treatment.

**Prevention**

Because the exact reasons for bacterial overgrowth in the vagina are unknown, it may not be always possible to prevent bacterial vaginosis. However, by decreasing certain behaviors (smoking, vaginal douching, and having multiple sex partners) a woman can reduce her chances of developing the condition.

**Outlook**

Bacterial vaginosis can be effectively treated with antibiotics. The presence of bacterial vaginosis does appear to increase a woman's risk for acquiring [sexually transmitted infections](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=58875) (STDs), including [HIV](http://www.emedicinehealth.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=58830).