

Sexually Transmitted Diseases/Infections

Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is the most common vaginal infection in women of childbearing age. BV is associated with the replacement of normal vaginal flora by an overgrowth of anaerobic bacteria and numerous fastidious or uncultivated anaerobes. In the United States, BV is common in pregnant women.

Not much is known about how women get BV; however, some activities or behaviors that can upset the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina and put women at increased risk include having a new sex partner or multiple sex partners, and douching. It is not clear what role sexual activity plays in the development of BV. Women who have never had sexual intercourse can be affected. Symptoms, if present, may include vaginal irritation with discharge, odor, pain, itching, or burning. Women with BV are at increased risk for the acquisition of some STDs (e.g., HIV, gonorrhea, chlamydia, HSV-2), complications after gynecologic surgery, complications of pregnancy, and recurrence of BV.

BV can be diagnosed by the use of clinical criteria or Gram stain. A Gram stain is considered the gold standard laboratory method for diagnosing BV. If a Gram stain is not available, clinical criteria can be used. Diagnosis requires three of the following symptoms or signs: homogeneous, thin, white discharge that smoothly coats the vaginal walls; presence of clue cells on microscopic examination; pH of vaginal fluid >4.5; or a fishy odor of vaginal discharge before or after addition of 10% KOH (i.e., the whiff test).

Although BV will sometimes clear up without treatment, all women with symptoms of BV should be treated to avoid complications. Two different antibiotics are recommended as treatment for BV, metronidazole or clindamycin. Male partners generally do not need to be treated; however, BV may spread between female sex partners. Because recurrence of BV is common, women should be advised to return for evaluation if symptoms recur.

Although many cases are diagnosed and treated, BV is not reportable under the current N.C. Administrative Code.

For more information:

- CDC fact sheet, www.cdc.gov/std/bv/STDFact-Bacterial-Vaginosis.htm
- CDC STD Treatment Guidelines 2010 - Bacterial Vaginosis, www.cdc.gov/std/treatment/2010/vaginal-discharge.htm#a1