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Bacterial Vaginosis

Overview

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis is a mild infection in the vagina caused by a type of bacteria (germ). The vagina normally contains a lot of "good" bacteria, called lactobacilli (say: "lack-toe bah-sil-li"), and a few other types of bacteria, called anaerobes (say: "ann-air-rob'es"). Too many anaerobes can cause bacterial vaginosis. It is not known why the anaerobe bacteria overgrow and cause this infection.

Symptoms

How do I know I have bacterial vaginosis?

You may notice a discharge from your vagina. The discharge may be clear or colored. It may be very light or heavy. It may have a fishy smell, especially after you have sexual intercourse. Some women have bacterial vaginosis without any symptoms.

Causes & Risk Factors

How did I get bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis is an overgrowth of bacteria that are normally in the vagina. Researchers do not completely understand why it occurs. However, activities such as douching or having a new sexual partner or multiple sexual partners can put you at greater risk for bacterial vaginosis. While it's more common in women who are sexually active, it also occurs in women who are not sexually active. It's not usually necessary for your sex partner to be treated.

Diagnosis & Tests

How can my doctor tell if I have bacterial vaginosis?

Your doctor will examine your vagina and use a cotton swab to get a sample of the discharge. This sample will be tested.

Treatment

Does it have to be treated?

Yes. If the infection isn't treated, the bacteria may get up into the uterus or the fallopian tubes and cause more serious infections. Treating bacterial vaginosis lowers this risk. Treatment is especially important in pregnant women.

How is bacterial vaginosis treated?

It can be treated in one of several ways. Your doctor may prescribe pills for you to take by mouth, or a cream or gel to put in your vagina. It's important to use your medicine exactly as your doctor tells you.

If your doctor prescribes metronidazole or other medicines, don't drink any alcohol while taking the medicine or for 24 hours afterward. Combining alcohol with these medicines can cause nausea and vomiting. Even the small amount of alcohol in many cough syrups can cause nausea and vomiting if you're taking metronidazole. Also, be sure to tell your doctor about any other medicines you are currently taking.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- What is the likely cause of my bacterial vaginosis?
- Do I need any tests, such as tests for sexually transmitted infections?
- What do my test results mean?
- What treatment option do you recommend?
- Will I need medicine? How do I take it?
- When can I expect relief from my symptoms?
- Will my sexual partner need treatment?
- Is it safe for me to have sex?

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Reviewed/Updated: 02/14

Created: 09/00