

## Bacterial Vaginosis: Causes, Symptoms, and What You Can Do to Protect Yourself

As you may have guessed from the somewhat scary sounding name, bacterial vaginosis is a bacterial infection that occurs in the vagina and is technically considered an STD. A little less than one-third of women aged 14-49 will be infected at some point, according to the [Centers for Disease Control](#), but understanding more about the infection is the first step to keeping yourself healthy.

### Causes and Risk Factors

While the true root cause of bacterial vaginosis is an overgrowth of that certain type of bacteria, usually because of a decrease in growth of the good lactobacillus bacteria, there are also several things that can up your risk:

- Sexual activity. BV is a sexually transmitted disease, so by default, having sex increases your risk of the infection. However, certain sexual activities — such as having oral or anal sex — can increase the risk even more. The more partners you have had, the higher your risk.
- Douches and feminine sprays. While it may seem counter-intuitive, these "cleansing" methods are actually very disruptive to the natural chemistry and flora of the vagina and can kill the good bacteria that keeps infection at bay.
- Smoking

It's important to note here that these are just *possible* causes and risk factors. Around 19 percent of people infected are not sexually active, so it is possible to have BV even if you've never had sex.

### Signs and Symptoms

The most common [symptoms](#) associated with bacterial vaginosis are a burning and itching sensation in the vagina and vulva and a thin white or gray discharge. This is why it's often mistaken for a yeast infection. The main way to tell the difference is that yeast causes a thicker cottage cheese like discharge. BV can also cause burning while urinating or during sex and often comes with a strong fishy odor.

### Treatments and Prevention

Bacterial vaginosis is diagnosed by taking a sample of the vaginal discharge and running a test. The good news is that bacterial vaginosis is usually fairly easily treated in women with antibiotics, although it is possible for the infection to recur, so you may need a follow-up visit with your health care provider to ensure all is clear. You will also need to let your sexual partners know that you were diagnosed so they can see if they need to seek treatment as well.

Preventing BV comes down to limiting sexual partners, practicing safe sex with condoms, and practicing good hygiene (without douches and sprays), but even doing all of these things doesn't guarantee you won't get infected at some point. If you think you may have BV or are experience troublesome symptoms, it's important to talk to your doctor.