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Bacterial Vaginosis

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis is a common inflammation of the vagina. In the past bacterial vaginosis has also been called nonspecific vaginitis or Gardnerella vaginitis.

How does it occur?

Bacterial vaginosis appears to be caused by an overgrowth of several types of bacteria. It is normal to have these bacteria in the vagina. However, too many of them in the vagina can cause bacterial vaginosis. It is not known what causes the overgrowth of bacteria. It is also not known if this condition can be passed to another person by sexual activity. Most cases of bacterial vaginosis occur in sexually active women. However, women who are not sexually active can also have bacterial vaginosis.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom is a discharge from the vagina. The discharge may be gray or yellowish. It often has a fishy odor. You may also have itching around the opening of the vagina. The bacteria associated with bacterial vaginosis are sometimes found in the tips of men's penises. However, men do not usually have any symptoms.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will do a pelvic exam and get a sample of vaginal discharge. The discharge will be examined under the microscope.

How is it treated?

Your health care provider may prescribe a medicine that you take by mouth. Or your provider may prescribe a medicine for you to put into your vagina. If you have bacterial vaginosis several times in spite of treatment, your health care provider may recommend treating your partner too.

How long will the effects last?

The symptoms usually go away within a few days after you start treatment.

How do I take care of myself while I'm being treated?

If you have sexual intercourse while you are taking the medicine, make sure you use a condom. Otherwise, it may be hard for your health care provider to know if the medicine worked. If your symptoms return when you stop using condoms, tell your health care provider.

Metronidazole (Flagyl), a drug often used to treat vaginosis, is chemically similar to Antabuse. Antabuse is a drug sometimes used to help people stop drinking alcohol. Drinking alcohol while you are taking metronidazole may cause severe nausea and vomiting.

What can be done to help prevent bacterial vaginosis?

Because the cause is not known, there is no way to prevent it.