

Bacterial Vaginosis

Fact Sheet

What is bacterial vaginosis?

A healthy vagina has many types of bacteria present. Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is a common condition where there is an imbalance and overgrowth of a certain type of bacteria in the vagina. This overgrowth can be treated, or it may clear up by itself.

What are the symptoms?

Often there are no symptoms of bacterial vaginosis.

When they do occur, symptoms can include:

- change or increase in vaginal discharge (e.g. watery, grey or pearly)
- strong, unusual or 'fishy' smell from the vagina
- vaginal discomfort and/or itch.

These symptoms may be more noticeable at certain times of the menstrual cycle.

If there are no symptoms, bacterial vaginosis is sometimes found when testing for other conditions such as thrush.

How is bacterial vaginosis spread?

Bacterial vaginosis can occur when conditions change in the vagina, which upsets the balance of normal bacteria.

Bacterial vaginosis is most common in people who are sexually active, but it can occur at any time.

While bacterial vaginosis is not considered to be a sexually transmitted infection or something you can 'catch', it can be more likely in people who have sex without a condom.

Bacterial vaginosis can be linked with new sexual partner/s, increased sexual activity, menstruation (period) or having a sexually transmitted infection (STIs).

It can also be caused by the use of soaps, vaginal deodorants, douches, bath oils or bath additives which can change the normal balance of the vagina (see our [Genital Skin Care Fact Sheet](#)). This is why it's important to avoid using these products around or inside the vagina.

Bacterial vaginosis also appears to be more common in people who have a sexual partner who also has a vagina.

When should I have a test for bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis is not part of a routine check for STIs.

Occasionally it may be included in tests before having pelvic procedures, such as an IUD insertion.

You should have a test for bacterial vaginosis if you are having symptoms such as unusual vaginal discharge.

How is bacterial vaginosis tested?

A swab from the vagina is used to test for bacterial vaginosis. If you have symptoms, this should be done as part of an examination and STI check by a health professional.

When is treatment needed?

If there are no symptoms, or if the symptoms are not troublesome, treatment for bacterial vaginosis may not be needed. It will often go away by itself over time.

Treatment may be needed when:

- symptoms are a problem for you
- you are pregnant
- you are about to have a pelvic procedure, such as an IUD insertion.

How is bacterial vaginosis treated?

Bacterial vaginosis is treated with antibiotics. This can be oral tablets, or a gel or cream inserted into the vagina.

The vaginal cream can weaken condoms and cause them to break.

It is common for sexual partners with a vagina to also have bacterial vaginosis, so they may want to consider testing and treatment.

At this stage, sexual partners with a penis do not always need to be tested or treated for bacterial vaginosis. However, there is some research suggesting that treating partners of people with bacterial vaginosis helps to reduce reinfection. You can speak to your doctor about this.

Will I get bacterial vaginosis again?

You may get bacterial vaginosis again. Recurrence (symptoms happening again) is common and can be treated, but this may only resolve the problem temporarily. Changing treatments may be useful (e.g. trying a different type or method of antibiotic such as the vaginal gel).

How do I keep my vagina healthy?

There are some simple ways to maintain good vaginal health.

You can:

- avoid using perfumed or medicated creams, oils, soaps, antiseptics or bath additives in the vagina
- wear cotton underwear and change them daily
- change pads or tampons regularly
- avoid douching (washing inside) the vagina
- avoid using deodorants or perfumed products in and around the vagina
- only use water to wash the vulva
- clean any sex toys between use
- use condoms (external or internal) or dental dams consistently to protect against STIs.

If you think something is not right, it's a good idea to seek help from a health professional.

Where can I get tested?

- You can visit SHINE SA for further information, testing and treatment.
- Make an appointment with your local doctor, health care provider or Aboriginal Health Service.
- You can also contact Adelaide Sexual Health Centre:
260 Currie Street, Adelaide
Tel: 71117 2800
www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/adelaidesexualhealthcentre



© SHINE SA. Last updated April 2025

SHINE SA Fact Sheets are regularly reviewed and updated. To download the most recent version visit www.shinesa.org.au

SHINE SA Appointments and Enquiries

Tel 8300 5300 **Online Bookings** www.shinesa.org.au
Clinic locations and times are available at www.shinesa.org.au

Sexual Healthline

Tel 1300 883 793 **Country callers (toll free)** 1800 188 171

Talk to a sexual health nurse about any sexual health issue.
Available 9am – 12.30pm, Monday – Friday

National Relay Service

www.relayservice.gov.au
133 677 (TTY/Voice) 1300 555 727 (Speak & Listen) 0423 677 767 (SMS Relay)