BACTERIAL VAGINOSIS (BV)

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is a condition occurring in women where the normal balance of bacteria in the vagina is disrupted. Lactobacilli are a type of bacteria that are normally found in the vagina. In women with BV, the number of lactobacilli is reduced. BV is different to Candidiasis (‘Thrush’) although the symptoms can sometimes appear to be similar. Candidiasis is a fungal infection that requires different treatment to BV.

What are the symptoms of bacterial vaginosis?

- a white-grey vaginal discharge which may have a “fishy” odour, the discharge can be more noticeable during menstruation and after having sex
- vulval or vaginal irritation or soreness.

What causes bacterial vaginosis?
The cause of BV is not fully understood. The vagina contains a range of bacteria which help keep the vagina healthy. BV develops when there is a change in the balance of bacteria in the vagina.

Who gets bacterial vaginosis and how common is it?
Any woman can get BV, however sexually active women are more likely to develop the condition. It is unknown if BV is transmitted through sex, or whether sexual activity causes BV by disturbing the vaginal balance. Studies show that douching (washing high inside the vagina), having a new sexual partner, engaging in sex work, not using condoms, or having a female partner have all been linked to BV. BV can also be present at the same time as sexually transmitted infections.

How is bacterial vaginosis diagnosed?
Diagnosis is based on symptoms, clinical signs and laboratory testing. To accurately diagnose BV, your practitioner may insert a speculum into the vagina. A speculum is a device used to hold the walls of the vagina apart so that the cervix and vagina can be examined and a sample can be collected. To collect a sample a cotton swab (long cotton bud) is inserted into the vagina, a small amount of discharge is removed, and then examined under a microscope. Practitioners who have access to a microscope are able to diagnose BV in the clinic, however the sample is usually also sent to a laboratory for the bacteria in the sample to be grown and identified.

What is the treatment for bacterial vaginosis?
BV will sometimes clear up without treatment, however treatment is recommended for:

- women with symptoms
- women having some gynaecological procedures such as a termination of pregnancy
- pregnant women

BV is treated with either oral antibiotic tablets or a vaginal antibiotic cream for 7 days. BV can reoccur if not treated properly. There is evidence to suggest that male partners do not need treatment as previous studies have shown no advantage from treating males. Some studies have shown a high incidence of BV in female partners of women who have sex with women (WSW). No study has investigated the value of treating the female partners of WSW for BV simultaneously.

What can happen if bacterial vaginosis is not treated?
50% of women with BV do not have any symptoms and for the majority of these women BV may not need any treatment. In most cases, if left untreated BV causes no complications. However BV may cause more serious complications in the following situations:

- in pregnant women BV has been associated with miscarriage, premature delivery and low birth weight of infants
- it has been suggested BV may contribute to pelvic inflammatory disease but the evidence is not consistent.
How can I prevent bacterial vaginosis?
BV is not completely understood and the best ways to prevent it are unknown. However, the following should be avoided:
• douching
• use of bath oils, detergents, bubble bath
• excessive washing of the genitals with soaps and body wash.

Will bacterial vaginosis come back again?
Some women will experience recurrent episodes and require further antibiotic treatment.

Where can I get tested and treated for bacterial vaginosis in Canberra?

Canberra Sexual Health Centre
Building 5, Level 1, North Wing
Yamba Drive Garran
Ph: (02) 6244 2184

General Practitioners (GPs) in Canberra

Sexual Health and Family Planning ACT
Level 1, 28 University Avenue
Canberra ACT 2601
Ph: (02) 6247 3077

Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Service
63 Boolimba Crescent
Narrabundah ACT 2604
Phone: (02) 6284 6222
Free call: 1800 110 290 or 1800 120 859

Useful websites
http://www.caredownthere.com.au
http://www.mshc.org.au

To access information about bacterial vaginosis in other languages:
http://www.dermnetnz.org/bacterial/bacterial-vaginosis.html

References:


USA Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) Fact Sheet
http://www.cdc.gov/std/bv/stdfact-bacterial-vaginosis.htm

This fact sheet is designed to provide you with general information only. It is not intended to replace the need for a consultation with a health practitioner. All clients are advised to enquire about any specific questions or concerns they may have. Every effort has been made to ensure that this information is correct at the time of publishing.