Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is a very common vaginal infection. It occurs when bacteria that normally exist in small numbers in the vagina multiply rapidly. BV mainly occurs in women who regularly have sex. The infection does not get passed on to the man.

**Women – know your body**
1. Vagina
2. Clitoris
3. Cervix
4. Womb
5. Urethra
6. Anus

**Signs and symptoms**
Some women have no symptoms, but the most common are:

- a change in vaginal discharge. This may increase, become thin and watery, change to a white/grey colour and develop a strong fishy smell, especially after you've had sex
- redness or soreness in and around the vagina
- very rarely, itching or swelling in and around the vagina
Bacterial vaginosis (BV)

How BV develops
BV occurs when the acidity of the vagina changes. This can be caused by:

- having sex without a condom, where semen enters the vagina
- douching (washing out your vagina) or using vaginal deodorants too often
- using too much perfumed soap or bubble bath when you wash
- using strong detergents to wash your underwear
- using an IUD (which used to be called the coil)

The acidity (pH) of the vagina alters at different stages in the menstrual cycle, and this may also create an environment in which the bacteria multiply.

However, BV often develops without any of these conditions.

Where to go for help

- Your local NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic. You can find details of your nearest NHS sexual health clinic in the phone book under genito-urinary medicine (GUM), sexually transmitted diseases (STD) or venereal diseases (VD). Or phone your local hospital and ask for the ‘special’ or GUM clinic. You will get free, confidential advice and treatment. You can go to any clinic anywhere in the country – you don’t have to go to a local one – and you don’t have to be referred by your GP.
- Your own GP.

The tests for bacterial vaginosis

- An examination of your genital area is carried out by a doctor or a nurse.
- Samples are taken, using a cotton-wool or spongy swab, from your vagina.
- The acidity of the vagina may be measured using pH paper. (Women with BV will have a higher pH than normal.)
- A specimen of vaginal discharge may be added to a chemical called potassium hydroxide. If you have BV, a fishy smell will be produced.

- An internal pelvic examination may be carried out.
- A sample of urine may be taken.

None of these tests should be painful, but may sometimes be uncomfortable.

Diagnosis and treatment

The diagnosis of BV is made by looking at a specimen of your vaginal discharge under a microscope and the doctor’s examination. In some clinics, the test result is available immediately. In others a sample is sent to a laboratory for testing, and the result is usually available within one week.

Treatment is easy. You will be prescribed antibiotic tablets or a cream to put inside the vagina.

If you are allergic to any antibiotics, or if there is any possibility that you may be pregnant, it is important that you tell your doctor. BV can cause a miscarriage or other problems during pregnancy. Different treatment may need to be prescribed.

It is always important that you finish the course of treatment, even if your symptoms disappear before you have taken the last tablet or finished the cream.

Follow-up

It is not necessary to return to the doctor if you have finished your treatment and your symptoms have gone. But do make sure you get the results of any tests which were done. If you are still having problems then you should go back to the doctor.

It is possible to have more than one sexually transmitted infection at the same time. That is why it is important to have a full examination and tests. NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics routinely test for a number of sexually transmitted infections.

Remember, after treatment, using condoms during sex can reduce your risk of getting or passing on sexually transmitted infections.

This factsheet is one of a series which give information on the following range of infections and diseases: bacterial vaginosis, chlamydia, cystitis, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhoea, hepatitis (A, B and C), non-specific urethritis, penile cancer, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), prostate cancer, pubic lice, scabies, syphilis, testicular cancer, thrush and trichomonas vaginalis.
Free copies of any of these factsheets are available from GP surgeries, NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics, or your local health promotion unit (in the phone book under your local Health Authority).