The Proper Balance

What happens when bad bacteria outnumber good microorganisms in the vagina?

June 5, 2014 By Kate Ferguson

Many women suffer from bacterial vaginosis (BV), a mild vaginal infection often accompanied by a strong, unpleasant odor that some describe as “a fishy smell.”

Some women complain that BV makes them feel “uncomfortable and self-conscious” as well as “disgusted, ashamed, dirty, annoyed and distressed,” according to findings published in a recent issue of the PLOS ONE medical journal.

In addition, chronic episodes of BV affect women even more intensely, to the point where the condition may interfere with their personal and sexual relationships.

In general, doctors don’t know what causes bacteria in the vagina to become imbalanced. But experts say women’s risk of developing BV rises with douching, smoking and having multiple sex partners or a new lover.

Besides restricting their number of sex partners, not smoking and not douching, women can lower their chances of a BV infection by practicing safer sex, says Hilda Hutcherson, MD, a gynecologist and author of Pleasure: A Woman’s Guide to Getting the Sex You Want, Need and Deserve.

“Condoms may reduce the risk of developing BV,” she explains.

Additionally, because bacterial vaginosis may be present without any noticeable symptoms, many experts suggest women get routine gynecologic exams that include a test of their vaginal discharge, a look at a sample of their vaginal tissue and a standard pelvic examination.

The good news is if you do get a case of BV, the treatment is pretty simple and straightforward. Doctors usually prescribe an antimicrobial cream to get rid of the infection.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.