Bacterial infection in women may cause fertility problems: a NetWellness column

By Plain Dealer guest columnist
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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, bacterial vaginosis is the most common cause of vaginitis (inflammation of the vagina) symptoms among women of childbearing age. This condition is the most common infection for pregnant women, affecting over 1 million women per year.

Studies show that pregnant women with bacterial vaginosis may have babies who are born premature or with low birth weight. Since this condition can be confused with other vaginal infections, it is important to understand what exactly bacterial vaginosis is, as well as what can be done to treat and prevent it.

What is bacterial vaginosis?

Bacterial vaginosis is the most common cause of vaginal irritation, itching, and discharge, and is sometimes referred to as Gardnerella. Gardnerella is really just one of the normal vaginal bacteria found in excess during bacterial vaginosis. The vagina has several different types of bacteria present in balanced amounts. Typically, the vagina has a predominance of Lactobacilli which keep the vaginal environment acidic. When this balance is disrupted by too much of one type, women experience vaginal itching, discharge, or redness.
Causes

Any condition that changes the environment of the vagina (the vaginal pH or acidity) could lead to this imbalance, such as vaginal creams, douching, hygiene products, lubricants, soaps, or certain types of condoms. Oral sex may also cause a change in the vaginal environment, possibly leading to bacterial vaginosis. Most cases of bacterial vaginosis occur in women who are sexually active, but women who are not having sex can also have it.

Symptoms

There are two typical symptoms of bacterial vaginosis:

The most common symptom is abnormal vaginal discharge. This may be gray or yellowish in color, and has a fishy odor.

You may also experience vaginal itching and burning (often because of vaginitis or other infections that can accompany bacterial vaginosis). However, nearly 50% of women who are diagnosed with bacterial vaginosis at a clinic visit may not have noticed any symptoms. The symptoms are often confused with other vaginal infections, such as yeast infections. If you have tried to treat vaginal discomfort with yeast infection medicated creams and it hasn't worked, it is possible you have bacterial vaginosis, NOT a yeast infection. Make an appointment with your health care provider if you are not sure.

Treatment Options

Bacterial vaginosis can be treated with antibiotics in pill or cream form. The most common treatment prescribed is metronidazole. This is applied vaginally twice a day for five days. You should not drink alcohol while taking metronidazole. If it does not clear up within a few days of treatment, or you continue to get bacterial vaginosis, other conditions of the vagina (such as a yeast infection or cervical infection) should be ruled out as a cause.

Prevention

Although not considered a sexually transmitted infection, there is some evidence that condom use helps prevent recurrence. You should avoid douching or using other feminine hygiene products that may lead to an increase in the incidence of bacterial vaginosis.

Sexual Transmission

Currently, the role of sexual activity in bacterial vaginosis is not known. Your partner should not need to be treated, unless you have a case of bacterial that is not responding to antibiotics. In these cases, it may be helpful to treat your partner.

Complications

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Typically, bacterial vaginosis does not cause complications. However, researchers are currently investigating a possible connection between bacterial vaginosis and pelvic infections that can sometimes result in infertility and tubal (ectopic) pregnancies. Research also suggests that pregnant women with bacterial vaginosis have a greater chance of delivering premature and low-birth-weight babies. Another possible complication of bacterial vaginosis is a susceptibility to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Talk to Your Doctor

If you are experiencing vaginal discomfort and over-the-counter treatments have not alleviated your symptoms, you should visit a healthcare professional. This discomfort may be more than just a yeast infection. Bacterial vaginosis can be very treatable with antibiotics.