

'Minor infection' impacts women's social lives

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(Medical Xpress)—New research has shown that a common vaginal infection, often regarded as minor, is having a major effect on women's lives, with recurrent sufferers avoiding sex and even social activities.

In a study published in *PLOS One*, researchers at Monash University, The University of Melbourne, Melbourne Sexual Health Centre and The University of Sydney interviewed [women](#) aged 18-45 with recurrent bacterial vaginosis (BV), an infection caused by an imbalance in vaginal flora. They found the impacts went beyond [physical discomfort](#).

Approximately one in three Australian women will experience BV at some point in their lives. Symptoms include an abnormal 'fishy' odour and increased vaginal discharge. Longer term it has been associated with

increased risks of miscarriage and [preterm delivery](#), and susceptibility to HIV or other STDs. It is more common in women who have sex with women, who have a one in two chance of experiencing the condition.

Dr Jade Bilardi of the Monash University Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine and Melbourne Sexual Health Centre led the study.

"Our study is the first to show how much recurrent BV is impacting on the lives of women in Australia," Dr Bilardi said.

"Our findings show that while BV is often considered a minor and common vaginal condition by clinicians, its recurrent nature and the substantial impact it can have on women's social, sexual and emotional lives means that women's experiences can extend far beyond the physical symptoms."

Unfortunately for many women, even after treatment with antibiotics, BV often comes back again within 12 months. The new study has shown that women who experience recurrent BV are susceptible to poor self-esteem, sexual withdrawal, self-isolation and feelings of self-blame as a result of having recurrent BV.

Researchers found that the symptoms of BV - in particular abnormal odour – left many women feeling too embarrassed and self-conscious to engage in normal sexual activities. Some women even reported avoiding social or recreational activities or sitting too close to others at work or social events for fear that others would notice their odour.

While a third of women were not overly concerned by having recurrent BV, describing it as no worse than thrush, the remainder felt it had a substantial impact on them. The degree to which it impacted on women physically, emotionally, sexually and socially often depended on the

frequency of episodes and severity of symptoms. Overall, recurrent BV left many women feeling ashamed, dirty, unattractive, insecure and confused and frustrated.

More information: [dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0074378](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0074378)

Provided by Monash University

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