

Startling New Research Reveals A Hidden City In Your Vagina

If you thought it was crowded giving birth, learn about the microbiome that could change the way doctors treat BV's



[Myla Morningstar](#)

8 min read

I've had yeast infections for years.

Great way to start a story, am I right?

Pulls you right in.

Most of us are all too familiar with this recurring plague that can remind you vaguely of the cottage cheese you had for lunch. The itch itself is enough to drive you insane. When they finally released Monostat over- the- counter, I was over the moon.

Not a pretty picture, I admit. And it's enough to make cottage cheese permanently suspect.

But it's all part of being a woman.

Men walk around completely unaware of what we have to endure — and sometimes I think they do it without a thought in their pretty little heads.

But enough about funguses.

I recently discovered a different but closely related problem, one I have not yet had the displeasure of experiencing.

Nonetheless, I found it fascinating— mostly because it illustrates once again how often science fails women.

Medicine has not always been kind to women. Perhaps lazy is a better word.

I've written several stories recently about how science has repeatedly failed the female sex.

In a story about HRT's, (Hormone Replacement Therapy), I discussed how “science” caused an entire generation of women to dump their hormones down the toilet. It was called [The Bad Science That Ruined Hormone Therapy for a Generation](#). You can read it here:

The Bad Science That Ruined Hormone Therapy For A Generation

How modern medicine vilified HRT and harmed millions of women.

medium.com

In another story, I investigated how “science” was responsible for adding seven days of sugar pills to a standard birth control pill packet, when they were not needed and had absolutely no medical value. Those seven days of sugar pills were there to appease the Catholic Church and the male patriarchy. That story was called [No Need to Bleed: The Great Birth control Deception](#):

No Need To Bleed: Exposing The Great Birth Control Deception

For those of you who have relied on oral contraception at one time or another, I have some big news.

medium.com

So I wasn't shocked to find more of the same, this time with [BV's \(Bacterial Vaginosis\)](#).

The hidden world

There is a hidden world inside each of us, and it makes its home in our vaginas, too.

A hidden world of bacteria, too small to be seen with the naked eye.

Turns out that BV is the most [common](#) vaginal condition in adult women.

It's not a fungal (yeast) infection or an STD, yet it makes the lives of millions of women difficult to manage on a day-to-day basis.

Along with a thin milky discharge, there is a pronounced “fishy” smell that mortifies many women. It can make sex seem more like an Olympic event than something intimate and enjoyable.

Some women are convinced that other people can smell the odor even when they’re fully clothed, and sufferers often pack several pairs of clean underwear before they leave for work.

They bring perfumes, cleansers and douches to use throughout the day, which can discombobulate the microbiome and make the whole problem worse.

BV isn’t an STI, but it can [increase](#) the risk of getting STIs, HIV, pelvic inflammatory disease, and it can exacerbate pregnancy complications.

BV can be treated with antibiotics and it will often clear up. Sometimes, forever.

Sometimes it will come back. For seemingly no reason.

Or after sex.

Or when a woman starts her period.

In the not-so-distant past (and sometimes still today) these chronic infections were linked to bad hygiene.

Women were also told that BV could be “caught” like an STD.

Some women were told it WAS an STD.

Sufferers were sometimes considered dirty, trashy or promiscuous.

What is happening inside you

BV's are the the end result of the entire vaginal microbiome — the living ecosystem inside you — shifting away from “balance.”

In a healthy state, “good” bacteria dominate and keep the vaginal environment protected.

But when “bad” bacteria increase, the chemistry of the entire system changes.

The fairy tale

For decades, women have been told a fairy tale about our “hidden world.”

A chid's story, really.

There were “good” bacteria — the saintly Lactobacillus.

And there were “bad” bacteria — the villainous Gardnerella.

End of story. That was the entire narrative. Two characters. One moral to the story.

No nuance, no subplot, no cast of millions.

The harm

This framework of good and evil bacteria shaped every test, governed every diagnosis, and informed every doctor who told a patient “it’s nothing” even when her symptoms said otherwise.

And herein lies the harm.

Because BV kept recurring — for millions of women.

It kept recurring because treatments were designed for a world that never really existed — a world in which vaginal biology was simple. Good vs. Evil. And if your lab tests didn’t reflect this simple moral universe, you received the wrong treatment or no treatment at all.

The junk drawer

BV also became the junk drawer diagnosis.

Sometimes, even if your symptoms didn’t make sense, if you didn’t have a yeast infection you were told you had BV.

Then you were given antibiotics.

Antibiotic resistance, anyone?

If your symptoms still didn't make sense, then you were told you had bad hygiene.

And if they still didn't make sense, you were told it was just stress.

And this is how things went.

Until recently, when the University of Maryland began looking at this hidden world — and blew the lid right off.

The metropolis of the hidden world

What scientists at the U of M found is that the vaginal microbiome isn't a simple two-party system after all — it's a metropolis.

A whole bustling city of microbial neighborhoods, each with its own mood, politics, and complicated history.

Twenty-five distinct microbiome types.

Not two.

Twenty-five.

And they don't even behave the way we were told they behave.

They include multiple types dominated by *Gardnerella* that differ markedly from one another.

A recent missive from the University of Maryland says it best:

For decades, gynecological tests have relied on a simplified view of the vaginal microbiome, categorizing bacteria as either “good” or “bad.” New research from University of Maryland School of Medicine scientists challenges that assumption, revealing that bacteria of the same species can behave in fundamentally different ways, with important implications for women’s health. — Univ. Of Maryland, Heide Aungst

Kindergarten logic

The traditional model worked like this:

- Lactobacillus = stability, health, harmony
- Gardnerella = dysfunction, infection, trouble brewing

But the new research shows that the truth is...messier. More human. More... female, if you will.

Multiple microbiome types — even those dominated by the Gardnerella — behave nothing like one another.

BV is a perfect example of how women's health has been misunderstood for decades.

For instance, one of the “neighborhoods” run by the “bad” Gardnerella is actually functionally similar to a neighborhood run by the “good” Lactobacillus.

So the very same species has a radically different personality under different circumstances.

It's like finding out your ex and a Nobel laureate technically share 99.9% of their DNA.

Same species. Way different consequences.

Our old science was like trying to understand a city by counting how many people live there.

Without noticing that some are surgeons, some are thieves, and some are scribes who stand on their balconies at 3 a.m. writing poetry, bathed in moonlight.

It's impossible to understand much of anything without seeing things up close.

The new science

Researchers at the University of Maryland School of Medicine have shattered this story in a way that feels both thrilling and, frankly, overdue.

The researchers built two new open-source tools — VIRGO2 and VISTA — designed to analyze not just what bacteria are present in a woman's vagina, but also what their role actually is.

For the first time, science can now see the vaginal microbiome in high resolution, and this has changed everything.

Now we can finally stop blaming women for “imbalances” when the real problem was that the science was lacking.

We can stop treating all BV's the same way, as though all Gardnerella behave identically, even when interacting inside different bio-neighborhoods.

We can stop telling women “everything looks normal” when the old tools simply couldn't see the big picture — or the small one.

Precision gynecology

What comes next is the beginning of precision gynecology — a world where vaginal health isn't flattened out into just two categories but is understood as the complex, shifting ecosystem that it is. Better diagnostics. Better treatments. Less shame. Less guesswork.

The story of women's bodies was never simple. It was just simplified.

Now, at last, the truth is within reach, and it's richer, more complex, and more beautiful than the cartoonish ideas we were handed for the last fifty years.

Why this matters (besides “science is cool”)

Women deserve precision medicine. The old diagnostic tools lumped millions of us into buckets too big and too vague to actually help us.

Getting an accurate BV diagnosis often felt like you were first playing Russian roulette with your body. Your body has always been trying to tell you a story that was more complicated than “good” or “bad.”. The problem is, no one had the right tools to listen.

This research won't rewrite clinical care overnight.

But we can finally answer some important questions. Why do some women get these infections while others never do? Why do treatments work for some and fail for others? Why do some women get chronic,

recurring infections that never respond to treatment, or only respond temporarily?

Women's health has always been framed around simplicity, as if complexity would overwhelm us. As if we couldn't handle the truth.

As if our bodies were too mysterious to map, or not mysterious enough to bother trying. But the vaginal microbiome turns out to be a full novel, not a pamphlet. A cast of 25, not two. A living ecosystem that changes and adapts. We didn't misbehave. We weren't "unclean." We weren't broken.

The science was just too small.

The next frontier

What comes next?

Hopefully, better diagnostics. More personalized treatment. Less guesswork. Less shame.

And, if the researchers are right, a future where clinicians no longer dismiss vaginal symptoms as "normal" or "unexplained," but instead diagnose based on specific microbial signatures and not stereotypes.

Women's health is finally stepping into the age of high resolution and bespoke solutions. Our body is complex, and we are finally creating the tools needed to understand it.

It feels revolutionary — a revolution that has only just begun.

Sources and Citations:

[University of Maryland](#) School of Medicine Researchers Discover That Vaginal Bacteria Don't Always Behave the Same Way

by [Heidi Aungst](#)

Findings Could Transform How Women's Health Conditions Are Diagnosed and Treated

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