A vaginal yeast infection is an overgrowth of yeast (usually Candida albicans) in the vagina. This infection, most common in women age 16-35, affects approximately 1.3 million Americans annually. It is estimated three-fourths of all women will have a vaginal yeast infection; half of these women will have more than one infection in their lifetime.

What causes a vaginal yeast infection?
A woman does not have to be sexually active in order to develop a yeast infection. Yeast is a type of fungus that normally lives in small amounts on the skin and inside the vagina. When there is an overgrowth of yeast in the vaginal environment, an infection occurs.

The following factors may cause the overgrowth of yeast:
- Menstruation
- Pregnancy
- Some medications (antibiotics, steroids, oral contraceptives, etc.)
- Uncontrolled diabetes
- Constant moisture and irritation of the vagina
- Lowered immune system due to stress or a recent illness

Symptoms of a yeast infection include:
- Itching and burning in the vagina
- Itching and burning of the skin area around the vagina
- Swelling and redness of the skin area around the vagina
- A thick, white vaginal discharge that looks like cottage cheese
- A "yeasty" smell
- Burning during urination
- Pain during sexual intercourse
FYI: If itching is not present, it probably is not a vaginal yeast infection. In either case, medical treatment and advice is recommended.

What should be done if symptoms are present?
Anyone who experiences symptoms should contact a health care provider. A simple exam can be done to determine if symptoms are related to an overgrowth of yeast or another medical condition.

How is a yeast infection treated?
A yeast infection is typically treated with over-the-counter creams, tablets, or suppositories that are inserted into the vagina. A topical cream can be used to relieve itching in the area surrounding the vagina. A one-dose oral pill is also available through a prescription.

Is it important to seek medical attention every time a vaginal yeast infection is suspected?
Yes, it is important to contact a health care provider before starting any treatment. Certain vaginal diseases and urinary tract infections, such as bacterial vaginosis, vulvar vestibulitis, lichen planus, herpes, trichomoniasis, and other STDs, have similar symptoms to vaginal yeast infections. In fact, 2 out of 3 women who buy yeast infection medicine don’t really have a yeast infection. An examination may be necessary to determine if symptoms are a result of an overgrowth of yeast or another disease. Self-treatment for what is thought to be a yeast infection can exacerbate the condition. If a yeast infection is present, talk with a health care provider regarding treatment and prevention of reoccurring infections.

Tips to prevent a yeast infection
- Wear cotton underwear
- Do not wear pantyhose or tight fitting clothing everyday
- Dry the genital area thoroughly after showering or bathing; if necessary use a blow dryer on a cool setting to fully dry the genital area
- Wipe from front to back after using the toilet
- Do not sit in a wet swimsuit or damp clothes
- Do not douche or use feminine hygiene sprays, deodorant sanitary pads, deodorant tampons, or bubble bath
- Boost the body’s immune system with proper nutrition and an exercise program
- Limit the consumption of sweets and alcohol
- Medically treat sexual partners if recurrent infections occur

What is Bacterial Vaginosis?
Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) is a vaginal infection most commonly affecting women of reproductive age. BV generally does not cause complications, however it can present serious risks for certain populations (e.g., pregnant women).
What causes BV?
Although the cause of BV is not fully understood, it has been associated with an imbalance of bacteria in the vagina. The vagina contains both “good” and “harmful” bacteria. Under normal circumstances there is a greater ratio of “good” to “harmful” bacteria. However, it is thought when there is a change in the vaginal environment the number of “harmful” bacteria increases, thus promoting the onset of an infection. Some activities disrupting the normal balance of the vagina include:

- Douching
- Having a new sex partner or multiple sex partners

Note: BV is NOT an STD, but having BV can increase your chance of getting an STD

What are the symptoms of BV?
Although some women may experience no symptoms, the most common include:
- Abnormal, odorous vaginal discharge
- Gray, frothy vaginal discharge
- Fish-like odor, especially after intercourse
- Burning during urination
- Itching around the vaginal opening

How is BV diagnosed?
BV can be detected by performing a simple laboratory test. A small sample of vaginal fluid may be examined under the microscope for the presence of bacteria. In addition, the appearance, color, and smell of vaginal secretions may be used for diagnosis.

How is BV treated?
Antibiotics (particularly metronidazole and clindamycin) are typically prescribed for the treatment of BV infections. Note: BV can reoccur even after treatment is received.

What complications are associated with BV?
- Women who have been exposed to the HIV virus are at an increased risk for becoming HIV positive when a BV infection is present.
- Women who are HIV positive and have a BV infection can transmit HIV to their sex partners more easily.
- Increased risk for the development of pelvic inflammatory disease (PID).
- Increased risk of complications (e.g., premature birth, low birth weight) if infected with BV during pregnancy.

How can the recurrence of a vaginal infection be prevented?
- Do not douche and/or use hygiene sprays (they can disrupt the normal protective balance of bacteria within the vagina).
- Wash the vulva regularly with mild soap and water; rinse well and dry thoroughly after washing.
- Practice good bathroom hygiene; wipe from front to back after using the toilet.
- Do not wear tight jeans, panty hose without a cotton crotch, or other clothing that traps moisture; avoid sitting in a wet bathing suit or damp clothes.
- Limit the number of sexual partners and use a new latex or polyurethane condom during every sexual encounter.

References
- www.mayoclinic.com (Mayo Clinic)
- www.who.int (World Health Organization)
- www.cdc.gov (Centers for Disease Control)
- www.fda.gov (U.S. Food and Drug Administration)