

Fact Sheet

Gonorrhea

What is it?

Gonorrhea is a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) caused by a bacterium called *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*.

How do you get it?

You can get gonorrhea through unprotected oral, vaginal, or anal sex with an infected person. It can also be passed from an infected mother to her baby during birth.

What are the symptoms?

It can take 2 to 10 days (and sometimes longer) for any symptoms to appear. Often, men will have symptoms in the first week after infection.

Most men who have gonorrhea do have symptoms. Symptoms include a burning sensation when urinating, a white, yellow or green discharge from the penis, or itching around the urethra (opening to the penis). Men with gonorrhea can also get painful or swollen testicles.

Many women who have gonorrhea do not have symptoms or the symptoms may be mistaken for a bladder or vaginal infection. There may be pain or burning with urination, bleeding during or after sexual intercourse, abnormal bleeding between periods, a change in vaginal discharge, or pain with sexual intercourse.

Both men and women can get gonorrhea in the throat from oral sex. Infections in the throat may cause a sore throat and swollen glands, but usually cause no symptoms. Gonorrhea in the anus can cause discharge, bleeding, anal itching, soreness or painful bowel movements. There may be no symptoms.

How is it diagnosed?

A doctor or nurse takes a sample from the parts of the body that may be infected (cervix, urethra, anus, or throat). Urine testing is common for men. They may also take samples from the cervix (in a woman), urethra (in a man), throat or rectum. They send the samples to the laboratory for testing.

What are the complications?

Untreated gonorrhea in women may lead to a condition called Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID). It is a serious infection of the lining of the uterus (womb), the fallopian tubes and the ovaries. PID can cause chronic pelvic pain. Sometimes the fallopian tubes of a woman with PID are damaged. As a result, she may not be able to get pregnant or she may be at increased risk of ectopic pregnancy. Ectopic pregnancy is a life-threatening condition where the fertilized egg grows outside the uterus, usually in a fallopian tube. She will need treatment to stop the pregnancy.

Some men may develop swelling and pain in their testicles, a condition called epididymitis. It is also possible for men with untreated gonorrhea to have blocked tubes, so the sperm cannot pass through. This can cause infertility.

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Infants who are born to mothers with untreated gonorrhoea may get the infection as they pass through the birth canal. Infants may develop serious eye infections that could lead to blindness or a life-threatening blood infection.

What is the treatment?

Gonorrhoea is treated with antibiotics. The medication most often used is called Cefixime (Suprax). You take one pill. Some people may need to have an injection. People may have chlamydia at the same time as gonorrhoea. If you also have chlamydia, you will get a second antibiotic to treat this infection. It is important to take all the medication you are given even if you do not have symptoms or if the symptoms have disappeared. It is important for a person with gonorrhoea - and their partner(s) – not to have sex, even with a condom, until 7 days after they have finished taking all of their medication.

What about sexual partners?

All sexual partners within the past 60 days should be tested and treated. If you have not had sex in the past 2 months, then your last sexual partner should be examined and treated. Tell your partner(s) that having no symptoms does not mean there is no infection. A public health nurse can notify your partner(s) for you. Your name will be kept confidential.

Is follow-up important?

In some cases the doctor will advise you to have a follow-up test to make sure you are cured. This follow-up test should be done at least 1 week after you have completed the treatment.

Remember:

- Take all your medication as prescribed by your doctor or clinic.
- Avoid sex for 7 days after you and your sexual partner(s) have been treated. You can get reinfected every time you have sex with an untreated infected partner.
- If you have an untreated STI like gonorrhoea, it is easier to get HIV from a person who has it.
- Use condoms to lower the chance of getting STIs.
- It is possible to have more than one infection at a time, so it is important to be tested for other STIs.

For more information:

Call the AIDS and Sexual Health InfoLine at 416-392-2437
or go to
www.toronto.ca/health

Safer Sex

To reduce your risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI), use a condom every time you have vaginal, anal or oral sex.

November 2010