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Chlamydia Facts



What is chlamydia?

Chlamydia is one of the most common Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). It is caused by bacteria called chlamydia trachomatis.

How is chlamydia spread?

Chlamydia is spread through unprotected oral, vaginal, or anal sex with an infected person. It can take two to six weeks or longer for symptoms to appear. Sometimes, chlamydia can be spread to the eyes by hands or direct contact with infected fluids. It can also be passed from an infected mother to her baby during birth. A person remains infectious until he or she is properly treated. Untreated chlamydia can live in the body for months or years.

What are the symptoms of chlamydia?

More than 75% of women and 50% of men infected with chlamydia have no symptoms but can still pass the infection on to their sexual partner(s).

Women with symptoms of chlamydia may have increased vaginal discharge or irritation, pain during urination, bleeding during or after sexual intercourse, pain in the lower abdomen and pain during sexual intercourse.

Untreated chlamydia in women may lead to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). This is a serious infection of the lining of the womb (uterus), the fallopian tubes and the ovaries. Sometimes the fallopian tubes of a woman with PID are blocked by scar tissue and her eggs cannot pass through. When this happens, she may not be able to get pregnant. If the fallopian tubes are only partly blocked so that sperm can pass through, she may have a pregnancy inside the fallopian tube. This is called an ectopic or tubal pregnancy. This is a medical emergency and the woman needs to go to hospital for treatment. Women with untreated chlamydia may also have miscarriages. Some women will continue to have long-term pelvic pain.

Infants who are born to mothers with untreated chlamydia may become ill with pneumonia or eye infections.

A health professional can test women for chlamydia by taking a swab from the cervix. The cervix is the opening to the womb (uterus). Sometimes a swab may also be taken from a woman's urethra; or a urine test may be used to test for chlamydia.

Men may have discharge and itching around the urethra (opening in the penis). They may also have burning when they urinate, or pain and swelling in the testicles. These symptoms may come and go.

Men with untreated chlamydia may become sterile when the tubes carrying the sperm are blocked by scar tissue. They may have swelling and pain in their testicles. This is a condition called epididymitis.

Men can be tested with a urine test for chlamydia. Men should not urinate for one hour before this test. A swab can also be taken from the urethra in men.

Chlamydia can also be found in the throat or rectum using a swab.

How is chlamydia treated?

Chlamydia is treated with antibiotics. It is important that a person with chlamydia and their partners complete the full treatment to make sure that the infection is cured and avoid having sex, even with a condom, for seven days after they have finished taking all of their medication. A person can get reinfected every time they have sex with an untreated infected partner.

In some cases the health care provider will advise a follow-up test to make sure the infection is cured. This follow-up test should be done three to four weeks after treatment has been completed. It is important to remember that a person with an untreated STI like chlamydia may be infected with HIV more easily from a person who has it. It is also possible to have more than one infection at a time, so it is important to be tested for other STIs.

What about sexual partners?

All sexual partners within the past 60 days should be examined and treated. If you have not had sex in the past two months, then your last sexual partner should be examined and treated. A public health nurse can notify your partner(s) for you. Your name will be kept confidential.

Who is most at risk for chlamydia?

People who have multiple sexual partners and do not use condoms are at most risk for chlamydia. Infants born to mothers who have chlamydia are at risk for eye and lung infections.

What can I do to reduce the risk of chlamydia?

Learn about safer sex methods.

Talk to your partner(s) about their STI status and the use of protection.

Use condoms correctly every time you have vaginal, anal or oral sex to reduce your risk of getting chlamydia and other STIs.

Adapted from: Toronto Public Health Unit, It's Your Health

