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Gonorrhea Facts



What is gonorrhea?

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

What causes gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is spread through unprotected oral, vaginal, or anal sex with an infected person. Sometimes gonorrhea can be spread to the eyes by hands that have had direct contact with infected body fluids. It can also be passed from an infected mother to her baby during birth.

What are the symptoms of gonorrhea?

Over half of men and women infected with gonorrhea have no symptoms. They can unknowingly pass the infection on to their sexual partner(s). It can take two to seven days from the time a person is exposed to gonorrhea until they have symptoms. Sometimes this period is longer.

Women may have pain during urination, or bleeding during or after sexual intercourse or pain in the lower abdomen. Intercourse can be painful. Abnormal bleeding may happen between periods. Many women may only have more white or yellow smelly vaginal discharge. A swab of the cervix will show if a woman has gonorrhea.

Untreated gonorrhea in women may lead to a condition called pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). It is a serious infection of the lining of the womb or 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 gonorrhea may also have miscarriages. Some women will continue to have chronic pelvic pain.

Infants who are born to mothers with untreated gonorrhea may develop serious eye infections that could lead to blindness.

Men may have yellow or white smelly discharge from their penis, or itching around the urethra (opening in the penis). Men may also have to urinate more often and may have pain when they do. Pain and swelling in the testicles can occur. Gonorrhea can be diagnosed in men by testing a urine sample or swabbing the discharge from the penis.

Men with untreated gonorrhea may become sterile when the tubes carrying the sperm are blocked by scar tissue. Some men may have swelling and pain in their testicles, a condition called epididymitis.

In both men and women, gonorrhoea from oral sex can cause a sore throat and swollen glands.

Gonorrhoea from anal sex may cause discharge, bleeding and itchiness from the anus. Sometimes there are no symptoms. Gonorrhoea can be diagnosed by swabbing the throat or the rectum.

Who is most at risk for gonorrhoea?

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

How is gonorrhoea treated?

Gonorrhoea is treated with antibiotic pills. The medication often used is called Cefixime which is taken in a single dose. Sometimes gonorrhoea is treated with an antibiotic injection. People may have chlamydia at the same time as gonorrhoea. An antibiotic to treat chlamydia will be given at the same time. Even if your symptoms have disappeared, you must finish all pills to make sure that you are cured. It is important for the person with gonorrhoea and their partner(s) to not have sex, even with a condom, until seven days after they have finished taking all of their medication. You can get re-infected every time you have sex with an untreated infected partner.

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 one week after you have completed the treatment.

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. 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.

How can I reduce the risk of gonorrhoea?

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 gonorrhoea and other STIs.

Get tested for gonorrhoea if you are sexually active.

