



August 2011

# Gonorrhea

## What is gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by bacteria. The bacteria infect the cervix, urethra and other reproductive organs. Gonorrhea is easy to treat and can be cured.

## How gonorrhea spread

Gonorrhea is spread through unprotected oral, vaginal or anal sex with an infected person. Sometimes it can be spread to the eyes by hands or from direct contact with the infected fluids. It can also be passed from an infected mother to her baby during birth. Until a person finishes treatment, he/she continues to have the infection and can pass it to others.

## Symptoms of gonorrhea

Approximately 80 percent of women and 15 to 20 percent of men infected with gonorrhea have no symptoms. They can unknowingly pass the infection on to their sexual partner(s).

If symptoms do occur, they may appear two to seven days after sexual contact with an infected person. Symptoms vary depending on which part of the body is infected.

Women may have vaginal itching and abnormal discharge from the vagina. They may also have to pass urine more often and have pain in the lower abdomen.

Men may have yellowish-white discharge from the penis. They may also have burning when passing urine, frequent passing of urine, or pain and swelling in the testicles.

In both men and women, gonorrhea infection from oral sex may lead to sore throat and swollen glands. Gonorrhea infection from anal sex may cause itchiness and discharge from the anus.

## Complications of gonorrhea

Untreated gonorrhea in women may lead to a condition called Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID). PID is a serious infection of the lining of the 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 end up with a pregnancy inside the fallopian tube. This is called an ectopic pregnancy.

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

In both men and women, untreated gonorrhea may occasionally lead to arthritis. Infants who are born to

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mothers with untreated gonorrhoea may develop serious eye infections which could lead to blindness.

## Diagnosing gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea testing can be done two to three days after a possible exposure, as follows:

- for women, a test can be done by taking a sample from the cervix (the opening to the uterus)
- for men, a sample is taken from the urethra. Men should not pass urine at least one hour before the test
- for both men and women, a urine sample, throat swab or rectal swab can also be collected to test for gonorrhoea

## Treating gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea is treated with antibiotic pills called Cefixime. It is important that you complete the treatment as directed by your health care provider. If you have PID or epididymitis, you may need to go into a hospital and be treated with intravenous antibiotics.

## 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 60 days, your last sexual partner should be examined and treated. Tell your partner(s) that having no symptoms does not mean there is no infection. Your Public Health Nurse can help you to notify your partner(s). Your name will be kept confidential.

## Is follow-up important?

A follow-up test is recommended six months after you have completed the treatment to make sure that you are cured. In some situations, such as if your symptoms continue after treatment, a health care professional may ask for a follow-up test four weeks after treatment.

## Remember:

- take all your medication as prescribed by your doctor or clinic
- do not have oral, vaginal or anal sex with your sexual partner(s) until seven days after the last partner has completed treatment
- you can get reinfected every time you have sex with an untreated or infected partner
- use condoms to reduce the chance of getting STIs and to prevent pregnancy
- it is possible to have more than one infection at a time, so it is important to be tested for other STIs
- if you are taking the Birth Control Pill, use an additional form of birth control while taking antibiotics and for at least seven days after you finish your antibiotic pills

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