

What is gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by a bacterium that can grow and multiply easily in the warm, moist areas of the reproductive tract, including the cervix (opening to the womb), uterus (womb), and fallopian tubes (egg canals) in women, and in the urethra (urine canal) in women and men. The germ can also grow in the mouth, throat, eyes, and anus (butt).

How do people get gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is spread through contact between the penis, vagina, mouth, and anus. A man does not have to ejaculate to give gonorrhea to a sexual partner. Gonorrhea can also be transmitted to a baby during birth if the mother is infected.

Gonorrhea infection can spread to other parts of the body. For example, a person can get an eye infection after touching infected genitals (private areas) and then the eyes. People who have been treated for gonorrhea may get it again if they have sexual contact with another person or untreated partner who has gonorrhea.

Who is at risk for gonorrhea?

Any sexually active person can be infected with gonorrhea. In the United States, the highest reported rates of infection are among sexually active teenagers, young adults, and African Americans.

What are the signs and symptoms of gonorrhea?

Some men have signs or symptoms that appear 2 - 5 days after infection, but the symptoms can take as long as 30 days to appear or may not appear at all. Signs and symptoms include a burning sensation when urinating (peeing), or a white, yellow, or green discharge from the penis. Sometimes men with gonorrhea get painful or swollen testicles.

In women, the signs and symptoms of gonorrhea are often mild, and many women who are infected have no symptoms. Even when a woman has signs, they can be so mild they may be mistaken for a bladder or vaginal infection. The first signs and symptoms for women include a painful or burning sensation when urinating (peeing), increased vaginal discharge, or vaginal bleeding between menstrual periods. Women with mild or no symptoms are still at risk of developing serious complications.

Symptoms of rectal infection in both men and women may include discharge, anal itching, soreness, bleeding, or sometimes painful bowel movements. Rectal infection may also cause no symptoms. Infections in the throat may cause a sore throat or hoarseness, but usually causes no symptoms.

What are the complications of gonorrhea?

Untreated gonorrhea can cause serious and permanent health problems in both women and men.

In women, gonorrhea is a common cause of pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). About 1 million women in the United States develop PID each year. Women with PID do not necessarily have symptoms right away. When symptoms are present, they can be very severe and can include abdominal pain and fever. PID can lead to internal abscesses (pus-filled "pockets" that are hard to cure) and long lasting, chronic pelvic (lower belly) pain. PID can cause infertility, or damage the fallopian tubes enough to increase the risk of ectopic pregnancy. Ectopic pregnancy is a life-threatening condition in which a fetus grows outside the uterus, usually in a fallopian tube.

In men, gonorrhea can cause epididymitis, a painful condition of the testicles that can lead to infertility if left untreated. Without prompt treatment, gonorrhea can also affect the prostate, and lead to scarring inside the urethra, making urination difficult.

Gonorrhea can spread to the blood or joints. This condition can be life threatening. People with gonorrhea can more easily contract HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. HIV-infected people with gonorrhea are more likely to transmit HIV to someone else.

How does gonorrhea affect a pregnant woman and her baby?

If a pregnant woman has gonorrhea, she may give the infection to her baby as the baby passes through the birth canal during delivery. This can cause blindness, joint infection, or a life-threatening blood infection in the baby. Treatment of gonorrhea as soon as it is detected in pregnant women will reduce the risk of these complications. Pregnant women should consult a healthcare provider for appropriate prenatal care, testing, and treatment, if necessary.

How is gonorrhea diagnosed?

Several laboratory tests are available to diagnose gonorrhea. Your doctor will choose the one appropriate for you.

What is the treatment for gonorrhea?

Several antibiotics can successfully cure gonorrhea in adolescents and adults, but drug-resistant strains of gonorrhea are increasing in many areas of the world, including the United States, and successful treatment of gonorrhea is becoming more difficult. Because many people with gonorrhea also have chlamydia, another sexually transmitted disease (STD), antibiotics for both infections are usually given together. Persons with gonorrhea should be tested for other STDs.

It is important to take all of the medication prescribed to cure gonorrhea, even if the signs or symptoms stop before all the medication is gone. Although medication will stop the infection, it will not repair any permanent damage done by the disease. People who have had gonorrhea and have been treated can get the disease again. If you continue to have symptoms even after you are treated, you should return to your doctor to be re-tested.

How can gonorrhea be prevented?

The surest way to avoid spreading sexually transmitted diseases is to abstain from sexual intercourse, or to be in a long-term mutually faithful relationship with a partner who has been tested and you know is uninfected.

Latex condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can reduce the risk of getting gonorrhea.

Any genital symptoms such as discharge or burning during urination or unusual sore or rash should be a signal to stop having sex and see a doctor immediately. If a person has been treated for gonorrhea (or any other STD), he/she should notify all recent sex partners so they can see a healthcare provider and be treated. This will reduce the risk of sex partners developing serious complications, and the person's risk of becoming re-infected. The person and all sex partners must avoid sex until they have completed treatment.