

Gonorrhea

Gonorrhea is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacteria that grow in warm, moist areas of the body in women, such as the cervix, uterus (womb), and fallopian tubes. Gonorrhea can also infect the urinary tract, mouth, throat, eyes, and anus. It is usually spread by having vaginal, oral, or anal sex. Antibiotics can treat gonorrhea. If left untreated, it can cause serious health problems, including problems getting pregnant.

Q: How do you get gonorrhea?

A: Gonorrhea is spread through:

- Vaginal, oral, or anal sex. Gonorrhea can be spread even if there are no symptoms. This means you can get gonorrhea from someone who has no signs or symptoms.
- Genital touching. A man does not need to ejaculate (come) for gonorrhea to spread. Touching infected fluids from the vagina or penis and then touching your eyes can cause an eye infection. Gonorrhea can also be passed between women who have sex with women.
- Childbirth from woman to her baby

Q: What are the signs and symptoms of gonorrhea?

A: Most women with gonorrhea do not have any signs or symptoms. If you do get symptoms, they are often mild and can be mistaken for a bladder or vaginal infection.

Signs or symptoms of gonorrhea depend on where you are first infected by the gonorrhea bacteria.

Signs and symptoms in the genital area can include:

- Pain or burning when urinating
- More vaginal discharge than usual
- Vaginal discharge that looks different than usual
- Bleeding between periods
- Pain in the pelvis or abdomen

Signs and symptoms in other parts of the body include:

- **Rectum/anus:** anal itching, pus-like discharge, bright red blood on toilet tissue, or painful bowel movements

- **Eyes:** pain, itching, sensitivity to light, pus-like discharge
- **Throat:** sore throat, swollen glands in your neck
- **Joints (such as your knee):** warmth, redness, swelling, or pain while moving

Q: Do I need to get tested for gonorrhea?

A: If you are **24 or younger and have sex**, you need to get tested. Gonorrhea is most common among women between ages 15 and 24. You need to get tested if you have had any symptoms of gonorrhea since your last negative test result or if your sex partner has gonorrhea.

If you are **older than 24**, you need to get tested if, in the past year or since your last test, you:

- Had a new sex partner
- Had your sex partner tell you they have gonorrhea
- Have had gonorrhea or another STI in the past
- Have traded sex for money or drugs in the past
- Do not use condoms during sex and are in a relationship that is not monogamous, meaning you or your partner has sex with other people

You also need to get tested if you have any symptoms of gonorrhea.

Q: What should I do if I have gonorrhea?

A: Gonorrhea is easy to treat. But you need to get tested and treated as soon as possible.

If you have gonorrhea:

- **See a doctor or nurse as soon as possible.** Antibiotics will treat gonorrhea, but they will not fix any permanent damage to your reproductive organs.
- **Take all of the antibiotics.** Even if symptoms go away, you need to finish all of the antibiotics.
- **Tell your sex partner(s) so they can be tested and treated.** If they are not tested and treated, you could get gonorrhea again.

- **Avoid sexual contact until you and your partner(s) have been treated and cured.** Even after you finish your antibiotics, you can get gonorrhea again if you have sex with someone who has gonorrhea.
- **See your doctor or nurse again if you have symptoms that don't go away** within a few days after finishing the antibiotics.

Q: How can I prevent gonorrhea?

A: The best way to prevent gonorrhea or any STI is to not have vaginal, oral, or anal sex.

If you do have sex, lower your risk of getting an STI with the following steps:

- **Use condoms.** Condoms are the best way to prevent STIs when you have sex. Because a man does not need to ejaculate (come) to give or get gonorrhea, make sure to put the condom on before the penis touches the vagina, mouth, or anus. Other methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms, will not protect you from STIs.

- **Get tested.** Be sure you and your partner are tested for STIs. Talk to each other about your test results before you have sex.
- **Be monogamous.** Having sex with just one partner can lower your risk for STIs. After being tested for STIs, be faithful to each other. That means that you have sex only with each other and no one else.
- **Limit your number of sex partners.** Your risk of getting STIs goes up with the number of partners you have.
- **Do not douche.** Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina and may increase your risk of getting STIs.
- **Do not abuse alcohol or drugs.** Drinking too much alcohol or using drugs increases risky behavior and may put you at risk of sexual assault and possible exposure to STIs.

The steps work best when used together. No single step can protect you from every single type of STI.

For more information...

For more information about gonorrhea, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention (NCHHSTP), CDC, HHS
800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov/nchhstp

American Sexual Health Association
919-361-8400 • www.ashasexualhealth.org

Planned Parenthood Federation of America
800-230-7526 • www.plannedparenthood.org

This fact sheet was reviewed by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) staff.

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