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1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Gonorrhea

Q: What is gonorrhea?

A: Gonorrhea (pronounced gah-nuh-ree-uh) is a sexually transmitted disease (STD). This means that you get it by having oral, anal, or vaginal sex with someone who has gonorrhea. It's caused by a type of bacteria that can grow in warm, moist areas of the reproductive tract, like the cervix, uterus, and fallopian tubes in women as well as the urethra in men and women. Gonorrhea can also grow in the mouth, throat, eyes, and anus.

Q: How do you get gonorrhea?

A: This STD is spread through contact with an infected vagina, penis, anus, or mouth. It is spread through semen or vaginal fluids during unprotected sexual contact with a partner who has it. Touching infected sex organs, like the vagina or penis, and then touching your eyes can cause an eye infection. It cannot be passed by shaking hands or sitting on a toilet seat.

Gonorrhea can also be passed from a pregnant woman to her baby during the birth process through a vaginal delivery. In babies, gonorrhea infection may cause blindness, joint infection, or a life threatening blood infection.

Q: Who is at risk for gonorrhea?

A: 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.

Q: What are the symptoms of gonorrhea?

A: Most women who have gonorrhea have *no symptoms*. When a woman does have symptoms, they most often appear within 10 days of getting the STD.

A woman may have these symptoms:

- Pain or burning when passing urine
- Vaginal discharge that is yellow or sometimes bloody
- Bleeding between menstrual periods
- Heavy bleeding with periods
- Pain during sex

Any genital symptoms such as discharge, burning during urination, or pain during sex should be a signal to stop having sex and to see a doctor right away. Women with gonorrhea are at risk of developing serious complications from the infection, whether or not there are symptoms.

Men and women with an anal infection might have symptoms that may include discharge, soreness, bleeding, or itching of the anus, and painful bowel movements. Infections in the throat may cause a sore throat but usually cause no symptoms. With an eye infection, symptoms may include redness, itching, or discharge from the eye.

Q: Are there tests for gonorrhea?

A: Yes. There are three types of tests for gonorrhea:

- **Swab sample.** A swab sample from the part of the body likely to be infected (cervix, urethra, penis, rectum, or throat) can be sent to a lab for testing.



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- **Urine test.** Gonorrhea in the cervix or urethra can be diagnosed with a urine sample sent to a lab.
- **Gram stain.** This is done right in a clinic or doctor's office. A sample from the urethra or a cervix is placed on a slide and stained with dye. It allows the doctor to see the bacteria under a microscope. This test works better for men than for women.

Talk to your doctor about getting tested if you have any symptoms of gonorrhea, if you think you or your partner could have it, or if you know your partner has it.

Q: How is gonorrhea treated?

A: Antibiotics are used to cure gonorrhea. Many people who have gonorrhea also have another STD called chlamydia. Doctors often give a combination of antibiotics to treat both STDs. Finish all the medicine that you are prescribed by your doctor. Even if the symptoms go away, you still need to finish all of the medicine. If symptoms continue after receiving treatment, see your doctor. Although antibiotics can cure the infection, they do not repair any permanent damage done by the disease.

If you have gonorrhea, talk with all of your sexual partners. They should get tested and treated for gonorrhea, even if they don't have any symptoms. Also avoid sexual contact until you and your partner(s) have been treated and cured. People who have had gonorrhea and received treatment may get infected again if they have sexual contact with a person who has gonorrhea.

Q: What happens if gonorrhea isn't treated?

- A:** Gonorrhea that is not treated can cause these serious problems in women:
- Increased risk of getting HIV or spreading HIV
 - Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID is an infection in a woman's pelvic organs, like the uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries. Women with PID do not necessarily have symptoms. When symptoms are present, they can be severe and can include abdominal pain, fever, backache, irregular periods, pain during sex, and vaginal discharge. This infection can lead to infertility. It can also cause ectopic pregnancy, in which an egg implants in the fallopian tube. This can cause miscarriage and possibly death of the mother. PID can also cause long-lasting, chronic pelvic pain.
 - Widespread infection to other parts of the body, like the blood, joints, or heart

Q: Can gonorrhea cause problems during pregnancy?

A: Yes. A pregnant woman with untreated gonorrhea may be at risk for miscarriage, preterm delivery, or having her water break too early. 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. Treating the newborn's eyes with an antibiotic immediately after delivery can prevent



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serious eye infections. Treatment of gonorrhea as soon as it is found in pregnant women will reduce the risk of these health problems. All sex partners of pregnant women must also be treated for gonorrhea. Pregnant women should talk with their doctors for testing and treatments that are safe for them.

Q: How can I keep from getting gonorrhea?

A: There are steps you can take to keep from getting this STD:

- **Don't have sex.** The best way to prevent gonorrhea or any STD is to practice abstinence, or not having vaginal, oral, or anal sex.
- **Be faithful.** Have a sexual relationship with one partner who has been tested for gonorrhea and is not infected is another way to reduce your chances of getting infected. Be faithful to each other, meaning that you only have sex with each other and no one else.
- **Use condoms.** Protect yourself with a condom EVERY time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Condoms should be used for any type of sex with every partner. For vaginal sex, use a latex male condom or a female polyurethane condom. For anal sex, use a latex male condom. For oral sex, use a dental dam. A dental dam is a rubbery material

that can be placed over the anus or the vagina before sexual contact.

- **Know that some methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms, will not protect you from STDs.** If you use one of these methods, be sure to also use a latex condom or dental dam (used for oral sex) correctly *every time* you have sex.
- **Talk with your sex partner(s) about STDs and using condoms.** It's up to you to make sure you are protected. Remember, it's YOUR body! For more information, call the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at **1-800-232-4636**.
- **Talk frankly with your doctor or nurse and your sex partner(s) about any STDs you or your partner have or had.** Talk about any sores or discharge in the genital area. Try not to be embarrassed. Being honest could save your lives.
- **Have regular pelvic exams.** Talk with your doctor about how often you need them. Many tests for STDs can be done during an exam. Ask your doctor to test you for gonorrhea and other STDs. The sooner an STD is found, the easier it is to treat.
- If you are pregnant, get tested for gonorrhea. Get tested as soon as you think you may be pregnant. ■



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For More Information . . .

You can find out more about gonorrhea by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center 1-800-994-9662 or contacting the following organizations:

CDC Info, HHS

Phone: (800) CDC-INFO or
1-800-232-4636

American Social Health Association

Phone: 1-800-783-9877
Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org>

CDC National Prevention Information Network (NPIN), CDC, HHS

Phone: 1-800-458-5231
Internet Address: <http://www.cdcpin.org>

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

Phone: 1-800-762-2264
Internet Address: <http://www.acog.org>

National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention, CDC, HHS

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/std>

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Phone: 1-800-230-7526
Internet Address:
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

Phone: 301-496-5717
Internet Address: <http://www.niaid.nih.gov/publications/stds.htm>

The gonorrhea FAQ was reviewed by the Division of STD Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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