

Gonorrhoea

Overview

Gonorrhoea is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that is caused by the *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* bacteria.

This infection can be passed from one person to another by having oral sex, vaginal sex, or anal sex (back passage) with an infected person.

The most common symptom of gonorrhoea is an unusual discharge (fluid) flowing from the penis or vagina and pain with urination. However, often there are no symptoms at all.

Places it can infect

Gonorrhoea bacteria can infect the urethra (the tube that carries urine out of the body), cervix (the entrance to a woman's womb), fallopian tubes (the tubes that carry eggs into the womb), rectum (the part of the bowel just inside the anus), throat, and eyes.

If gonorrhoea is not treated, the infection can spread and cause serious complications depending on where the infection is located. For instance, if infection is on the cervix and remains untreated, it can spread upwards to the fallopian tubes and may lead to infertility.

Gonorrhoea can be cured by antibiotics. It is important for affected individuals to avoid having sex until they are cured and their sexual partners have been treated also.

Causes

Gonorrhoea is almost always transmitted through sexual contact with a person who is infected with the bacteria *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*.

Sexual contact (vaginal, anal, or oral sex) can spread the bacteria. People who have unprotected sex (without using a condom) are at increased risk of catching gonorrhoea.

Gonorrhoea can also be passed from a mother to her baby as the baby passes through the birth canal. This may result in the baby's eyes becoming infected.

Symptoms

Symptoms of gonorrhoea are slightly different in men and women.

In men:

- Symptoms usually develop 2-14 days after infection occurs.
- If the infection is located in the penis, symptoms begin with an uncomfortable feeling in the urethra, and then, urination becomes painful and difficult.

- The need to urinate becomes more urgent and frequent.
- A discharge (a thick yellowish green fluid) may flow out of the penis.

In women:

- 80% of women show no symptoms of gonorrhoea infection.
- If symptoms do develop, it is usually within 7-21 days after infection occurs.
- Symptoms will depend on the site of the infection, for example If the infection occurs on the cervix, there may be vaginal discharge. If the infection has spread upwards into the womb and fallopian tubes there may be abdominal pain, and pain and discomfort around the pelvic region (the lower part of the abdomen, between the hip bones).

In both men and women:

- If the infection is located in the rectum it may have no symptoms. However it can cause pain, itching, and a discharge of pus.
- If the infection is located in the throat, there are usually no symptoms.

Diagnosis

If your doctor suspects that you have gonorrhoea he or she will ask you some questions about your symptoms and about your past sexual activity.

This is important information that will help the doctor know which tests to do.

Your doctor will then test for the presence of *gonorrhoeae* bacteria. This is done by collecting cells for analysis from:

- Your urine.
- Or by taking a swab of cells from the affected part of your body (i.e. the urethra, cervix, throat or rectum).

Treatment

Gonorrhoea is treated with antibiotics, including ceftriaxone (given as an injection). It is very important that all sexual partners are also treated for gonorrhoea, otherwise re-infection will occur.

Lifestyle

You can prevent gonorrhoea by using safe sex practices.

To practice safe sex:

- Use a condom whenever you have sex involving the penis (this includes oral sex).
- Use condoms correctly (follow the directions on the pack).

Other ways to prevent infection include:
Not having sex.

- Only having sex with a partner (or partners) who you know have been tested for any STIs and have no other sexual partners themselves.
- Get tested for STIs as soon as possible after having unprotected sex with someone you suspect might have an STI.

If you are currently being treated for an STI such as gonorrhoea:

- Don't have unsafe sex with anyone until your doctor says your infection has cleared up.
- Make sure you finish all of the treatment your doctor has prescribed.
- Don't drink any alcohol until your treatment has finished because this may reduce the effectiveness of the treatment.

Resources and support

For more information about STIs and safe sex see the following websites:

- Safe Sex No Regrets (WA AIDS Council). www.safesexnoregrets.com.au
- NSW Sexual Health Infoline: www.stipu.nsw.gov.au/shil or call 1800 451 624.
- Sexual Health, HIV AIDS, and Viral Hepatitis (Queensland Health): www.health.qld.gov.au/sexhealth.
- The Drama Down Under (STIs in Gay Men Action Group; note that this site contains some explicit language): <http://thedramadownunder.info>

Sources

- MD Consult Australia:Gonorrhoea www.mdconsult.com
- OOi, C. How to Treat: Managing Sexually Transmitted Infections Australian Doctor 2009; Oct 30: 21-28.
- Safe Sex No Regrets, What is Safe Sex? (WA Aids Council, 2011) www.safesexnoregrets.com.au/safe_sex

ItsMyHealth.com.au