



<http://www.womenshealth.gov>

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Gonorrhea

Q: What is gonorrhea?

A: Gonorrhea (gon-uh-REE-uh) is a common sexually transmitted infection (STI). 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. It can grow in the urethra in men and women. It can also grow in the mouth, throat, eyes, and anus.

Q: How do you get gonorrhea?

A: You can get gonorrhea during vaginal, oral, or anal sex with an infected partner. A man does not need to ejaculate to pass the infection or to become infected. Touching infected sex organs, like the vagina or penis, and then touching your eyes can cause an eye infection. Gonorrhea is not spread by shaking hands or sitting on toilet seats.

Gonorrhea also can be passed from a pregnant woman to her baby during delivery. In babies, gonorrhea infection can 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. In 2007, young women had over two times the gonorrhea rate of young men.

Q: What are the symptoms of gonorrhea?

A: Many women who have gonorrhea do not have symptoms. When a woman does have symptoms, they often appear within 10 days of getting the STI. But symptoms can be so mild or general that they are overlooked or mistaken for something else.

A woman may have some of 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

If you have any of these symptoms, stop having sex and see a doctor right away. Women with gonorrhea are at risk of developing serious health problems, whether or not there are symptoms.

For women and men, symptoms of an anal infection can 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.

For men, symptoms can include:

- Discharge from or pain inside the penis
- Pain or burning while passing urine
- Painful or swollen testicles

If your partner has any of these symptoms, stop having sex and ask your doctor about testing for both of you.



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Q: Are there tests for gonorrhea?

A: Yes. There are 3 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.
- **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. If you are tested for gonorrhea, you also should be tested for other STIs, including chlamydia, syphilis, and HIV.

Q: How is gonorrhea treated?

A: Antibiotics are used to cure gonorrhea. But more and more people are becoming infected with types of gonorrhea that do not respond well to drugs. This problem is making it harder to treat gonorrhea. Many people who have gonorrhea also have chlamydia. So, doctors often give medicine to treat both STIs at the same time. For treatment to work, you must finish all the medicine that your doctor gives you, even if the symptoms go away. If symptoms don't go away after treatment, see your doctor. Although treatment can cure the infection, it cannot fix any permanent damage done by the infection. Also, you can get gonorrhea again if you have sex with an infected person.

Q: What happens if gonorrhea isn't treated?

- A:** Gonorrhea that is not treated can cause these serious problems in women:
- Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID is an infection of a woman's reproductive organs above the cervix, such as the fallopian tubes and ovaries. Untreated gonorrhea is a common cause of PID. PID can lead to infertility, pregnancy problems, and pelvic pain. Some women have no symptoms of PID, and the damage caused by PID cannot be fixed. This is why finding out about and treating gonorrhea is so important.
 - Widespread infection to other parts of the body, like the blood, joints, or heart.
 - Increased risk of getting HIV or spreading HIV.

Q: Can gonorrhea cause problems during pregnancy?

A: Yes. A pregnant woman with untreated gonorrhea has a higher risk of miscarriage, preterm birth, or having her water break too early. Also, her baby could get the infection while passing 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 medicine right after birth can prevent eye infection. Treatment of gonorrhea as soon as it is found in pregnant women will lower the risk of these problems. All sex partners of pregnant women with gonorrhea must also be treated. If you are pregnant, ask your doctor about testing for STIs, including gonorrhea. Testing is simple, and treatment usually cures the infection and prevents problems for the baby.



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Q: How can I keep from getting gonorrhea?

A: There are steps you can take to lower your risk of getting gonorrhea:

- **Don't have sex.** The surest way to keep from getting gonorrhea is to practice abstinence. This means not having vaginal, oral, or anal sex.
- **Be faithful.** Having a sexual relationship with one partner who has been tested for gonorrhea and is not infected is another way to lower your risk of getting infected. Be faithful to each other. This means you only have sex with each other and no one else.
- **Use condoms.** Use condoms the right way and every time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Because a man does not need to ejaculate to give or get gonorrhea, make sure to put on the condom before the penis touches the vagina, mouth, or anus. Use a new condom if you want to have sex again or in a different way. 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 male latex condom. A dental dam might offer some protection during oral sex (mouth to vagina/anus).
- **Know that some methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms, will not protect you from STIs, including gonorrhea.** If you use one of these methods, be sure to also use a condom correctly every time you have sex.
- **Talk with your sex partner(s) about STIs 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 (800) 232-4636.

- **Talk frankly with your doctor and your sex partner(s) about any STIs you or your partner has or has had.** Talk about symptoms, such as sores or discharge. Try not to be embarrassed. Being honest could prevent serious health problems.
- **Have a yearly pelvic exam. Ask your doctor if you should be tested for gonorrhea or other STIs, and how often you should be retested.** Testing for many STIs is simple and often can be done during your checkup. The sooner gonorrhea is found, the more likely it can be cured before permanent damage is done.
- **If you are pregnant, get tested for gonorrhea.** Get tested as soon as you think you may be pregnant.

Q: I just found out I have gonorrhea. What should I do?

- Finish all the medicine that your doctor gives you. Even if the symptoms go away, you still need to finish treatment. If symptoms continue after treatment, see your doctor.
- Talk with your sex partner(s). Your sex partner(s) should get tested and treated for gonorrhea, even if they don't have any symptoms.
- Avoid sexual contact until you and your partner(s) have been treated and cured. People who have had gonorrhea and were treated can get infected again if they have sexual contact with a person who has gonorrhea.
- Once you have been treated and cured, take steps to lower your risk from getting gonorrhea again.



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For more information

For more information on gonorrhea, call [womenshealth.gov](http://www.womenshealth.gov) at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

**Division of STD Prevention,
NCHHSTP, CDC, HHS**

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

American Social Health Association

Phone number: (800) 227-8922

Internet address: <http://www.ashastd.org/>

**National Institute of Allergy and
Infectious Diseases, NIH, HHS**

Phone number: (866) 284-4107

Internet address: <http://www3.niaid.nih.gov/topics/sti>

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