

Gonorrhea - CDC Fact Sheet



What is gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by a bacterium. Gonorrhea can grow 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 bacterium can also grow in the mouth, throat, eyes, and anus.



How common is gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is a very common infectious disease. CDC estimates that, annually, more than 820,000 people in the United States get new gonorrhea infections and less than half of these infections are detected and reported to CDC. CDC estimates that 570,000 of them were among young people 15-24 years of age. In 2011, 321,849 cases of gonorrhea were reported to CDC.

How do people get gonorrhea?

People get gonorrhea by having sex with someone who has the disease. "Having sex" means anal, vaginal, or oral sex. Gonorrhea can still be transmitted via fluids even if a man does not ejaculate. Gonorrhea can also be spread from an untreated mother to her baby during childbirth.

People who have had gonorrhea and have been treated may get infected again if they have sexual contact with a person infected with gonorrhea.

Who is at risk for gonorrhea?

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

What are the symptoms of gonorrhea?

Some men with gonorrhea may have no symptoms at all. However, common symptoms in men include a burning sensation when urinating, or a white, yellow, or green discharge from the penis that usually appears 1 to 14 days after infection. Sometimes men with gonorrhea get painful or swollen testicles.

Most women with gonorrhea do not have any symptoms. Even when a woman has symptoms, they are often mild and can be mistaken for a bladder or vaginal infection. The initial symptoms in women can include a painful or burning sensation when urinating, increased vaginal discharge, or vaginal bleeding between periods. Women with gonorrhea are at risk of developing serious complications from the infection, even if symptoms are not present or are mild.

Symptoms of rectal infection in both men and women may include discharge, anal itching, soreness, bleeding, or painful bowel movements. Rectal infections may also cause no symptoms. Infections in the throat may cause a sore throat, but usually cause 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 can spread into the uterus (womb) or fallopian tubes (egg canals) and cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). The symptoms may be mild or 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 chronic (long-lasting) pelvic pain. PID can damage the fallopian tubes enough that a woman will be unable to have children. It also can increase her risk of ectopic pregnancy. Ectopic pregnancy is a life-threatening condition in which a fertilized egg grows outside the uterus, usually in a fallopian tube.

In men, gonorrhea can cause a painful condition called epididymitis in the tubes attached to the testicles. In rare cases, this may prevent a man from being able to father children.

If not treated, gonorrhea can also spread to the blood or joints. This condition can be life-threatening.

What about gonorrhea and HIV?

Untreated gonorrhea can increase a person's risk of acquiring or transmitting HIV—the virus that causes AIDS.

National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention
Division of STD Prevention



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 serious health problems for the baby. Treating gonorrhea as soon as it is detected in pregnant women will make these health outcomes less likely. Pregnant women should consult a health care provider for appropriate examination, testing, and treatment, as necessary.

Who should be tested for gonorrhea?

Any sexually active person can be infected with gonorrhea. Anyone with genital symptoms such as discharge, burning during urination, unusual sores, or rash should stop having sex and see a health care provider immediately.

Also, anyone with an oral, anal, or vaginal sex partner who has been recently diagnosed with an STD should see a health care provider for evaluation.

Some people should be tested for gonorrhea even if they do not have symptoms or know of a sex partner who has gonorrhea. Anyone who is sexually active should discuss his or her risk factors with a health care provider and ask whether he or she should be tested for gonorrhea or other STDs.

People who have gonorrhea should also be tested for other STDs.

How is gonorrhea diagnosed?

Most of the time, a urine test can be used to test for gonorrhea. However, if a person has had oral and/or anal sex, swabs may be used to collect samples from the throat and/or rectum. In some cases, a swab may be used to collect a sample from a man's urethra (urine canal) or a woman's cervix (opening to the womb).

Find an STD testing facility near you

What is the treatment for gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea can be cured with the right treatment. It is important to take all of the medication prescribed to cure gonorrhea. Medication for gonorrhea should not be shared with anyone. Although medication will stop the infection, it will not repair any permanent damage done by the disease. Drug-resistant strains of gonorrhea are increasing, and successful treatment of gonorrhea is becoming more difficult. If a person's symptoms continue for more than a few days after receiving treatment, he or she should return to a health care provider to be reevaluated.

What about partners?

If a person has been diagnosed and treated for gonorrhea, he or she should tell all recent anal, vaginal, or oral sex partners so they can see a health care provider and be treated. This will reduce the risk that the sex partners will develop serious complications from gonorrhea and will also reduce the person's risk of becoming re-infected. A person with gonorrhea and all of his or her sex partners must avoid having sex until they have completed their treatment for gonorrhea and until they no longer have symptoms. For tips on talking to partners about sex and STD testing, visit www.gytnow.org/talking-to-your-partner/.

How can gonorrhea be prevented?

Latex condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can reduce the risk of getting or giving gonorrhea. The most certain way to avoid gonorrhea is to not have sex or to be in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected.

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Where can I get more information?

Division of STD Prevention (DSTDP)
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/std

CDC-INFO Contact Center
1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)
Email: cdcinfo@cdc.gov