



## GONORRHEA

### What is gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is a common sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*, a bacterium that multiplies easily in the body's mucous membranes. Gonorrhea bacteria can grow 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), mouth, throat, and rectum in women and men.

### How do people get gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea can be transmitted during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Gonorrhea can also spread from an infected mother to her newborn during vaginal childbirth.

Gonorrhea infection can spread to other parts of the body. For example, an individual can get an eye infection after touching infected genitals and then the eyes. Individuals who have had gonorrhea and received treatment may become infected again if they have sexual contact with infected people.

### What are the signs and symptoms of gonorrhea?

Most men have a burning sensation when urinating and a yellowish white discharge from the penis. Sometimes men with gonorrhea get painful or swollen testicles.

Women experience mild early symptoms, including a painful or burning sensation when urinating and a vaginal discharge that is yellow or occasionally bloody. Many infected women have no symptoms, or they are so non-specific that their symptoms are mistaken for a bladder or vaginal infection. Women with no or mild gonorrhea symptoms are still at risk of developing serious complications. Untreated gonorrhea in women can develop into pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). Symptoms of rectal infection include discharge, anal itching, soreness, bleeding, and sometimes painful bowel movements.

### When do symptoms appear?

In males, symptoms usually appear two to five days after infection, but it can take as long as 30 days. Once a person is infected with gonorrhea, he/she can spread the infection to others if condoms or other protective barriers are not used during sex.



## **How is gonorrhea diagnosed?**

Laboratory tests diagnose gonorrhea. Some tests require urine samples while others require that a specimen be collected from the cervix, penis, rectum, or throat.

## **How is gonorrhea treated?**

Gonorrhea can be treated and cured with antibiotics. However, many strains of gonorrhea have become resistant to some antibiotics over time. For that reason, it is important to fully complete prescribed medications. Many of the currently used antibiotics successfully cure gonorrhea in adolescents and adults.

## **Who is at risk for gonorrhea?**

Gonorrhea is a very common infectious disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that each year, 820,000 people in the United States get new gonococcal infections, of which only half are detected and reported to the CDC. The majority of new U.S. gonococcal infections are among young people aged 15 to 24 years. In 2011, 321,849 gonorrhea cases were reported to the CDC.

## **What are the complications of gonorrhea?**

In both men and women, untreated gonorrhea can cause serious and permanent problems. Women can suffer from pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), infertility, ectopic pregnancies, and chronic pelvic pain. Men can develop epididymitis, a painful condition of the testicles that sometimes leads to infertility if untreated. In men, gonorrhea can affect the prostate gland and lead to scarring inside the urethra, making urination difficult. In both sexes, gonorrhea can spread to the blood or joints, causing a life-threatening condition. Persons with gonorrhea can more easily contract HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Newborns with gonorrhea are at risk for blindness, joint infection, or a life-threatening blood infection.

## **How can gonorrhea be prevented?**

To avoid getting a sexually transmitted disease, abstain from sexual contact, or be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected. When used consistently and correctly, latex or polyurethane condoms can reduce the risk of transmission of gonorrhea.

## **Resources**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,  
<https://www.cdc.gov/std/gonorrhea/default.htm>, 1-800-232-4636; TTY: 1-888-232-6348  
in English and Spanish.

**Office of Infectious Disease Epidemiology**  
**24/7 Emergency Contact Number: 1-888-295-5156**