

Gonorrhea

What Is Gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is a sexually transmitted infection (STI). It's caused by infection with the bacterium *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*. It tends to infect warm, moist areas of the body, including the:

- urethra (the tube that drains urine from the urinary bladder)
- eyes
- throat
- vagina
- anus
- female reproductive tract (the fallopian tubes, cervix, and uterus)

Gonorrhea passes from person to person through unprotected oral, anal, or vaginal sex. People with numerous sexual partners or those who don't use a condom are at greatest risk of infection. The best protections against infection are abstinence, monogamy (sex with only one partner), and proper condom usage. Behaviors that make a person more likely to engage in unprotected sex also increase the likelihood of infection. These behaviors include alcohol abuse and illegal drug abuse, particularly IV drug use.

Symptoms of Gonorrhea

Symptoms usually occur within two to 14 days after exposure. However, many people infected with gonorrhea may never develop noticeable symptoms. It's important to remember that a person with gonorrhea who doesn't have symptoms (a nonsymptomatic carrier) is still contagious. A person is more likely to spread the infection to other partners when symptoms remain "silent" like this.

Symptoms in Men

Men may not develop noticeable symptoms for several weeks. Some men may never develop symptoms.

The first noticeable symptom in men is often a burning or painful sensation during urination. Other symptoms may include:

- greater frequency or urgency of urination
- a pus-like discharge (or drip) from the penis (white, yellow, beige, or greenish)

- swelling or redness at the opening of the penis
- swelling or pain in the testicles
- a persistent sore throat

Symptoms in Women

Many women don't develop any overt symptoms of gonorrhea. When women do develop symptoms, they tend to be mild or similar to other infections, making them more difficult to identify. Gonorrhea infections can appear much like common vaginal yeast or bacterial infections.

Symptoms include:

- discharge from the vagina
- pain or burning sensation while urinating
- the need to urinate more frequently
- sore throat
- pain upon engaging in sexual intercourse
- sharp pain in the lower abdomen
- fever

Untreated infection with gonorrhea may also result in the infection spreading to the bloodstream. In this case, rash, fever, or pain in the joints may eventually develop.

Treatment of Gonorrhea

Modern antibiotics can cure most gonorrhea infections. However, the emergence of drug-resistant strains of gonorrhea is a growing challenge. Most states provide free diagnosis and treatment at state-sponsored health clinics. Doctors will usually give an injection of strong antibiotics. Some follow-up may also be necessary.

The law requires healthcare professionals to report the infection, usually to the County Public Health Department. Public health officials will identify, contact, test, and treat any sexual partners of the affected person to help prevent the spread of the infection. Health officials will also contact other people these individuals may have had sexual contact with.

Some strains of gonorrhea developed resistance to common antibiotics. These cases may require more extensive treatment (usually with more expensive antibiotics) or combinations of antibiotics. Scientists are working to develop vaccines to prevent gonorrhea infection.