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The National Women's Health Information Center

A project of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health



## Frequently Asked Questions about Trichomoniasis

### What is trichomoniasis?

Trichomoniasis, sometimes called “Trich,” is a *sexually transmitted disease* (STD) that is very common in both women and men. It is caused by a parasite that can be passed from one person to another during sexual contact. It can also be picked up from contact with damp, moist objects such as towels or wet clothing. Women are more likely than men to have symptoms of infection. The disease can be treated and cured and usually has no serious complications. But, recent research has linked the disease to an increased risk for infection with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Trichomoniasis is a common STD found in young, sexually active women in the U.S.

### How do you get trichomoniasis?

Trichomoniasis is spread through sexual contact. You can get the disease from unprotected (not using a condom) vaginal and anal intercourse, as well as penis-to-vagina contact (without having vaginal intercourse) with an infected person. Women can get the disease from infected men or women. Men usually get the disease only from infected women. The *vagina* (birth canal) is the most common site of infection in women. In men, the *urethra* (opening on the penis where a man urinates through) is the most likely to become infected.

### What are the signs of trichomoniasis?

Men rarely get any symptoms with this disease. If a man does have symptoms, he may have an irritation inside the penis, mild discharge, or slight burning after urinating or ejaculating (having an orgasm).

Many women do have symptoms of infection. Symptoms most often appear within 5 to 28 days after exposure to the parasite. They include:

- A yellow, green, or gray vaginal discharge that has a strong odor.
- Discomfort during sexual intercourse and when urinating.
- Irritation and itching of the genital area.
- Lower abdominal pain (which is rare).

### Is there a test for trichomoniasis?

To tell if you have trichomoniasis, your health care provider will do a pelvic exam and lab test. A pelvic exam can show small red sores (ulcerations) on the wall of the vagina or on the *cervix* (opening to the uterus, or womb). Fluid samples are taken from the vagina in a woman and from the urethra in a man. The infection is harder to find in a man than in a woman.

## How is trichomoniasis treated?

This disease is treated with the drug *metronidazole* (Flagyl) or antibiotics. In men, symptoms can go away within a few weeks with no treatment. But, a man who never had any symptoms or whose symptoms have stopped, can continue to pass the disease to his partner until he gets treated. Because of this, it is important that both sexual partners be treated at the SAME TIME to get rid of the disease. They should also avoid sex until treatment is complete and no symptoms are present.

## Does trichomoniasis cause any problems with pregnancy?

If not treated, the disease can cause a pregnant woman to give birth early or to have a low birth weight baby. During the first 3 months of pregnancy, women shouldn't take metronidazole because it may hurt the baby. It is safe to take the medicine after the first 3 months of pregnancy.

## Is there any way to keep from getting trichomoniasis?

Yes, there are things you can do to keep from getting this disease:

- The best way to prevent trichomoniasis or any STD is to practice abstinence (don't have sex). Delaying having sex for the first time is another way to reduce your chances of getting an STD. Studies show that the younger people are when having sex for the first time, the more likely it is that they will get an STD. The risk of getting an STD also becomes greater over time, as the number of a person's sex partners increases.
- Have a sexual relationship with one partner who doesn't have any STDs, where you are faithful to each other (meaning that you only have sex with each other and no one else).
- Practice "safer sex." This means protecting yourself with a condom EVERY time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

For vaginal sex, use a latex male condom or a female polyurethane condom. For anal sex, use a latex male condom. If needed, use only water based lubricants with male and female condoms. For oral sex, use a *dental dam* – a device used by dentists, made out of a rubbery material, that you place over the opening to the vagina before having oral sex. If you don't have a dental dam, you can cut an unlubricated male condom open and place it over the opening to the vagina.

Even though it may be embarrassing, if you don't know how to use a male or female condom, talk to your health care provider. The biggest reason condoms don't work is because they are not used correctly.

- Be aware that condoms don't provide complete protection against STDs. But, they do decrease your chances of getting an STD. Know also that other methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms don't protect you from STDs. If you use one of these methods, be sure to also use a condom every time you have sex.
- Limit your number of sexual partners. Your risk of getting trichomoniasis increases with the number of partners you have.

- Don't douche. Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protects you from infection. This can increase your risk for getting trichomoniasis.
- Learn how to talk with your partner about STDs and using condoms. It's up to you to make sure you are protected. The organizations in the "For more information" at the end of this FAQ have tips for talking with your partner. You can also talk with your health care provider about this.
- When you are sexually active, especially if you have more than one partner, get regular exams for STDs from a health care provider. Tests for STDs can be done during an exam. And, the earlier an STD is found, the easier it is to treat.
- Learn the common symptoms of trichomoniasis and other STDs. Seek medical help right away if you think you may have this disease or another STD.

## **What should I do if I have trichomoniasis?**

Sometimes a person may be too scared or embarrassed to ask for information or help. But, keep in mind most STDs are easy to treat. Early treatment of STDs is important. The quicker you seek treatment, the less likely the STD will cause you severe harm. And the sooner you tell your sex partners about having an STD, the less likely they are to spread the disease to others (because they can get treated).

Doctors, local health departments, and STD and family planning clinics have information about STDs. The American Social Health Association (ASHA) has free information and keeps lists of clinics and doctors who provide treatment for STDs. Call ASHA at (800) 227-8922. You can get information from the phone line without leaving your name.

If you have trichomoniasis:

- Get it treated right away. Studies suggest that having an STD increases your risk for getting infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
- Follow your doctor's orders and finish all the medicine that you are given. Even if the symptoms go away, you still need to finish all of the medicine.
- Avoid having any sexual activity while you are being treated for trichomoniasis.
- Be sure to tell your sexual partners, so they can be treated too.
- Be sure to get a follow-up test to make sure that the infection has been cured.

## For more information...

You can find out more about trichomoniasis by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (800) 994-9662 or the following organizations:

### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

National Prevention Information Network

Phone Number(s): (800) 458-5231

Internet Address: <http://www.cdcnpin.org>

### **CDC National STD and AIDS Hotline**

Phone Number(s): (800) 227-8922

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org/NSTD/index.html>

### **National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention**

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/nchstp.html>

### **National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases**

Phone Number(s): (301) 496-5717

Internet Address: <http://www.niaid.nih.gov>

### **American Social Health Association**

Phone Number(s): (800) 783-9877

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

### **American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists**

Phone Number(s): (800) 762-2264

Internet Address: <http://www.acog.org>

### **American Academy of Family Physicians**

Phone Number(s): (913) 906-6000

Internet Address: <http://www.familydoctor.org>

### **Planned Parenthood Federation of America**

Phone Number(s) (800) 230-7526

Internet Address: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

This FAQ was developed from STD prevention fact sheets of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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*This FAQ has been reviewed by Sarah Landry, of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health  
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