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The National Women's Health Information Center

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Frequently Asked Questions about Chlamydia

What is chlamydia and how common is it?

Chlamydia is a common *sexually transmitted disease* (STD) caused by bacteria (*Chlamydia trachomatis*). An estimated 3 million Americans get chlamydia each year. Three of every four reported cases occur in young people under age 25. By age 30, 50 percent of sexually active women probably have had chlamydia.

Chlamydia is a serious disease that can damage a woman's reproductive organs – the *uterus* (womb), *ovaries* (organs that make eggs), and *fallopian tubes* (tubes that carry eggs from the ovaries to the uterus). The disease often has only mild or no symptoms. When diagnosed, chlamydia can be easily treated and cured with antibiotic drugs.

How do you get chlamydia?

Sexually active women and men can get chlamydia through sexual contact with an infected person. This STD can be transmitted during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Because there are often no symptoms, people who are infected may unknowingly pass the bacteria to their sex partners. Chlamydia can also be passed from an infected mother to her baby during childbirth. Babies born to infected mothers can get chlamydial infections in their eyes and respiratory tracts.

The more sex partners a person has, the greater the risk of getting infected with chlamydia. Chlamydia often occurs together with *gonorrhea*, another STD. Gonorrhea and chlamydia have similar symptoms and can have similar complications if not treated.

What are the symptoms of chlamydia?

Chlamydia is known as a "silent" disease because 75 percent of infected women and half of infected men have no symptoms. If symptoms do occur, they usually appear within 1 to 3 weeks of exposure. The infection is often not diagnosed or treated until there are complications. If you think you have chlamydia or are concerned about it, both you and your sexual partner should see a health care provider right away.

In women, the bacteria first attack the *cervix* (opening to the uterus, or womb) and the *urethra* (urine canal). Symptoms, if any, might include an abnormal vaginal discharge, or a burning sensation when urinating.

If the infection spreads from the cervix to the uterus and fallopian tubes, some women still have no signs or symptoms. If you do have symptoms, you might experience lower abdominal pain, low back pain, nausea, fever, pain during sex, and bleeding between menstrual periods.

Men with symptoms might have a discharge from the penis and a burning sensation when urinating. Men might also have burning and itching around the opening of the penis or pain and swelling in the testicles, or both.

How is chlamydia diagnosed?

There are two kinds of tests to diagnose chlamydia. One involves getting a sample from an infected site (cervix or penis) to be tested for the bacteria. A urine test can also accurately detect the bacteria. The urine test does not require a pelvic exam or swabbing of the penis. A Pap test is not a test for chlamydia.

What is the treatment for chlamydia?

Antibiotics are used to treat and cure chlamydia. A single dose of *azithromycin* or a week of *doxycycline* (twice daily) are the most commonly used treatments. All sex partners must also be treated. Different drugs, such as *erythromycin*, may be given to pregnant women.

What complications can result from untreated chlamydia?

If untreated, chlamydia infection can cause serious reproductive and other health problems. Like the disease itself, the damage that chlamydia causes is often "silent."

In women, the chlamydia bacteria often infect the cells of the cervix. If not treated, the infection can spread into the uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries and cause *pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)*. PID occurs in up to 40 percent of women with untreated chlamydia. PID can cause:

- *Infertility*, the inability to get pregnant. The infection scars the fallopian tubes, keeping eggs from being fertilized.
- An *ectopic* or tubal pregnancy. This means that a fertilized egg starts developing in the fallopian tube instead of moving into the uterus. This is a dangerous condition that can cause the death of the mother.
- Chronic pelvic pain.

In pregnant women, chlamydia infections may lead to premature delivery. Babies born to infected mothers can get infections in their eyes and respiratory tracts. Chlamydia is a leading cause of *pneumonia* and *conjunctivitis* (pinkeye) in newborns.

Women who have chlamydia may also be more likely to get *HIV*, the virus that causes *acquired immunodeficiency syndrome* (AIDS), from an infected partner. Chlamydia can cause *proctitis* (an infection of the lining of the rectum) in persons having anal sex. The bacteria can also be found in the throats of people who have oral sex.

Untreated chlamydia in men typically causes infection of the urethra (the tube that carries urine from the body). Infection sometimes spreads to the *epididymis* (a tube that carries sperm from the testis). This may cause pain, fever, and even infertility.

How can chlamydia be prevented?

There are things you can do to lower your risk for getting chlamydia:

- The best way to prevent chlamydia 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 chlamydia 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 chlamydia.
- 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 chlamydia and other STDs. But, remember that chlamydia often has no symptoms. Seek medical help right away if you think you may have chlamydia or another STD.

What should I do if I have chlamydia?

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 chlamydia:

- 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 health care provider'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 chlamydia.
- 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 chlamydia 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>

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*This FAQ has been reviewed by Carol Langford, M.D., of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health
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