

Gonorrhea

What is gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) caused by bacteria. The infection may occur in the rectum (the part of your intestine that ends at the anus), throat and urethra (the tube that carries urine from the bladder). The infection may also occur in the opening to the uterus, also known as the cervix, and the fallopian tubes.

To find out if you have gonorrhea, you need to visit a health care provider and have lab tests done. Some areas also have express testing available. Visit [GetCheckedOnline](#) or your local Health Authority website for more information.

How is it spread?

Gonorrhea is passed from one person to another by contact with body fluids containing the bacteria during unprotected oral, vaginal and anal sex.

Sometimes, a person with gonorrhea will have no symptoms. Even without symptoms, the infection passes easily to another person.

A person with a gonorrhea infection can pass the infection to others until they complete antibiotic treatment.

Gonorrhea can be passed to a baby's eyes during childbirth. This may lead to blindness if the baby is not treated.

Gonorrhea treatment does not protect you from getting it again. If you are treated and your sexual partner(s) are not, the bacteria will be able to pass back to you again.

What are the symptoms?

Some people with gonorrhea will have no symptoms and will not know that they have the infection.

For external genitals (penis), symptoms can include:

- Abnormal discharge from the penis
- Pain or a burning feeling when urinating
- Itching or irritation in the urethra

For internal genitals (vagina), the early symptoms are sometimes so mild that they are mistaken for a bladder infection or dismissed as a mild vaginal infection.

Symptoms can include:

- Change in the amount and colour of fluid from the vagina
- Pain or a burning feeling while urinating
- Abnormal vaginal bleeding, or spotting between periods or after sexual intercourse
- Pain in the lower abdomen
- Pain during vaginal sex

A gonorrhea infection in the rectum may cause discharge from the anus, rectal pain, mucous with stools, painful bowel movements and redness in the anal area.

Gonorrhea infection may occur in the throat but does not usually cause symptoms.

Symptoms may appear 2 to 7 days after being exposed to the bacteria.

What are the potential complications?

If treated in time, gonorrhea causes no lasting concerns. Untreated gonorrhea can lead to complications as the infection spreads to other areas of the body.

Complications may include difficulty getting pregnant, ectopic or tubal pregnancy or Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID). Visit [HealthLinkBC File #08c Pelvic inflammatory disease \(PID\)](#) for more information.

Complications can also include an infection in the testicles, which can lead to infertility.

If left untreated, gonorrhea may cause sexually acquired reactive arthritis which includes skin, eye and joint problems. It is also associated with a higher chance of getting or passing HIV.

What is the treatment?

Gonorrhea is treated with antibiotics. It is important to follow your treatment instructions carefully. If you are given pills, finish all of them. Sexual partners from the last 2 months need to be tested and treated. If you have not had a sexual partner in the last 2 months, then your last sexual partner will need to be tested and treated. It takes time for the infection to clear from the body. It is important that you do not have any oral, vaginal or anal sex (even with a condom) for 7 days after you and your partner(s) start the antibiotic treatment.

Ensure you and your sexual partner(s) finish your treatments. If you miss pills, experience vomiting after taking medication or have unprotected sex before you have finished all of the medication, there is a chance that the infection will stay in your body. It may also be passed back to you or your sexual partner(s) and cause health problems later. If this happens, talk with your health care provider who will help you determine if you or your partner(s) need more treatment.

You should take a follow-up test after 6 months as re-infection is common. If you are pregnant, or breastfeeding or chestfeeding, you should have a follow-up test 3 to 4 weeks after completing treatment.

The medications used to treat gonorrhea are available for free in B.C. Talk to your health care provider to see if they have them in stock.

Will my birth control work if I am taking antibiotics?

There is very little evidence to show that antibiotics make hormonal forms of birth control

work less effectively. Examples of hormonal birth control include the pill, the patch, the ring and the shot. If you are being treated with antibiotics, it is important to keep using your birth control as you normally would. If you have concerns, use condoms until your next period starts after completing the antibiotics. Speak to your health care provider for more information.

How can I reduce my chance of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI)?

These are some steps you can take to reduce your chances of getting an STI:

- Get informed: Understand different STIs, how to prevent them and which sexual activities are likely to pass them
- Get tested: Get tested regularly with your partner(s) for STIs so you know and can act as soon as possible
- Have safer sex: Use condoms, barriers or lube to make sex safer
- Get vaccinated: Vaccines are available to prevent some infections, including HPV, hepatitis A and hepatitis B
- Talk to your partner(s): Discuss consent, safer sex, sexual activities and preferences, and STI testing. Communication can help protect the health of you and your partners, and help you have positive sexual relationships and experiences

For more information

For more information on how you can reduce your chance of getting an STI, visit [HealthLinkBC File #080 Preventing sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#).



For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/health-library/healthlinkbc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C., visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.