



OFFICE OF POPULATION AFFAIRS

Gonorrhea

THE FACTS



Gonorrhea THE FACTS



What is Gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is a common bacterial infection that is sexually transmitted and often causes no symptoms. If not treated, gonorrhea can damage reproductive organs and make it difficult for a woman to have a baby.



How do people get Gonorrhea?

People can get gonorrhea through vaginal and anal sex. It's also possible to get the disease through oral sex. A pregnant woman can also give gonorrhea to her baby during delivery.

How common is Gonorrhea?

More than 700,000 cases of gonorrhea are estimated to occur each year in the U.S., only about half of which are reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).



What are the symptoms?

Symptoms can start within a few days or weeks after exposure to gonorrhea. Many women **may not** have symptoms, but if they do, women may experience:

- Unusual discharge or drip from the vagina
- Burning and pain when they urinate
- If gonorrhea spreads to the reproductive organs (like the fallopian tubes) a woman may have pain in the abdomen or lower back; pain during sex; fever; or bleeding between her periods

Men are more likely to have symptoms than women. Men may experience:

- Discharge from the penis
- Burning when they urinate



Gonorrhea THE FACTS



Men or women who have anal sex can also get gonorrhea. They may have pain, discharge, or even bleeding from the rectum. It's also possible to get gonorrhea from oral sex. While there are usually no symptoms, some people will have a sore throat.

Testing/Diagnosis

There are several reliable lab tests for gonorrhea. Some are urine tests, while others take a swab from the penis or cervix. Ask your healthcare provider if you have questions about testing options.



Who should be tested?

Pregnant women should be tested for gonorrhea at the first prenatal visit. Even if a woman has been tested in the past, she should be tested again when she becomes pregnant.

Other persons who should be tested include sexually active individuals under age 25; people with previous gonorrheal infection or infection with other STDs; people with a new sexual partner, more than one partner, or who have had unprotected sex.

Anyone with genital symptoms (such as discharge, burning with urination, or bleeding) should see their healthcare provider and be evaluated for STDs.



What is the treatment for Gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is cured with antibiotics. Strains of gonorrhea that resist antibiotics are increasing, which can make treatment more difficult.

To maximize treatment effect:

- Take all of your medicine
- All partners should be tested and treated
- Re-infection is common, so get tested again about three months after completing treatment (especially if you don't know if your partner was treated).



Gonorrhea THE FACTS



What happens if Gonorrhea is untreated?

In women, gonorrhea that isn't treated may cause complications:

- Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID). This can happen when the infection spreads to the uterus or fallopian tubes. If untreated, PID can cause chronic pelvic pain and tubal (ectopic) pregnancies. PID can even damage the reproductive organs and lead to infertility (not being able to have a baby).
- Increased vulnerability to HIV infection. Gonorrhea can also make it easier for a woman to contract an HIV infection if she is exposed.
- Adverse effects in pregnancy. In pregnant women, gonorrhea can be passed to their babies during delivery, which can cause serious problems in a newborn- such as eye and joint infections.

While men don't often have complications with gonorrhea, sometimes an untreated infection can lead to epididymitis: pain and inflammation within the tube that carries sperm from the testes (called epididymis).

Gonorrhea infections can also spread to the blood or joints without complete treatment.

Reduce your risk

There are several things that can lower the risk of gonorrhea:

- Use a condom or other latex barrier (such as a dental dam) for each sex act (oral, anal, and vaginal). A barrier should be put on before any sexual contact takes place.
- Have sex with only one uninfected partner (who only has sex with you).
- Appropriate STD testing and treatment. Talk with your healthcare provider to see what tests might be recommended for you.



Talk to your partner

It can be hard to tell a partner that you have gonorrhea, but keep in mind that your partner can have it and not know. Tell all recent sex partners so they can be tested and receive treatment appropriately.



Gonorrhea THE FACTS



Sources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- [Gonorrhea Fact Sheet](#)
- [Gonorrhea: The Facts](#)
- [2010 STD Treatment Guidelines](#)

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

- [Understanding Gonorrhea](#)

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