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Gonorrhea

What Is It?

Gonorrhea (pronounced: gah-nuh-ree-uh) is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by bacteria called *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*. The bacteria can be passed from one person to another through vaginal, oral, or anal sex, even when the person who is infected has no symptoms. It can also be passed from a mother to her baby during birth. You cannot catch gonorrhea from a towel, a doorknob, or a toilet seat.

How Does a Girl Know She Has It?

A girl who has gonorrhea may have no symptoms at all or her symptoms may be so mild that she doesn't notice them until they become more severe. In some cases, girls will feel a burning sensation when they urinate, or they will have a yellow-green vaginal discharge. Girls may also experience vaginal bleeding between menstrual periods.

If the infection becomes more widespread and moves into the uterus or fallopian tubes, it may result in an infection called pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), which can cause abdominal pain, fever, and pain during sexual intercourse, as well as the symptoms above.

How Does a Guy Know He Has It?

Guys who have gonorrhea are much more likely to notice symptoms, although a guy can have gonorrhea and not know it. Guys often feel a burning sensation when they urinate, and yellowish-white discharge may ooze out of the urethra (at the tip of the penis).

How Long Until There Are Symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear 2 to 7 days after a person has been exposed to gonorrhea, and in girls they may appear even later.

What Can Happen?

Gonorrhea can be very dangerous if it is left untreated, even in someone who has mild or no symptoms. In girls, the infection can move into the uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries (causing PID) and can lead to scarring and infertility (the inability to have a baby). Gonorrhea infection during pregnancy can cause problems for the newborn baby, including meningitis (an inflammation of the membranes around the brain and spinal cord) and an eye infection that can result in blindness if it is not treated.

In guys, gonorrhea can spread to the epididymis (the structure attached to the testicle that helps transport sperm), causing pain and swelling in the testicular area. This can create scar tissue that might make a guy infertile.

In both guys and girls, untreated gonorrhea can affect other organs and parts of the body including the throat, eyes, heart, brain, skin, and joints, although this is less common.

How Is It Treated?

If you think you may have gonorrhea or if you have had a partner who may have gonorrhea, you need to see your doctor or gynecologist. He or she will do an exam which may include checking a urine (pee) sample, or for a girl, swabbing the vagina or cervix for discharge, which will then be analyzed. Talk to your doctor about which test is best for you. The doctor may also test for other STDs, such as syphilis or chlamydia. Let the doctor know the best way to reach you confidentially with any test results.

If you are diagnosed with gonorrhea, your doctor will prescribe antibiotics to treat the infection. Anyone with whom you've had sex should also be tested and treated for gonorrhea immediately. This includes any sexual partners in the last 2 months, or your last sexual partner if it has been more than 2 months since your last sexual experience.

If a sexual partner has gonorrhea, quick treatment will reduce the risk of complications for that person and will lower your chances of being reinfected if you have sex with that partner again. (You can become infected with gonorrhea again even after you have been treated because having gonorrhea does not make you immune to it.)

It's better to prevent gonorrhea than to treat it, and the only way to completely prevent the infection is to abstain from all types of sexual intercourse. If you do have sex, use a latex condom every time. This is the only birth control method that will help prevent gonorrhea.

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