

STD/STI INFORMATIONAL FACT SHEET

GONORRHEA (gon o RHEE a)

What is gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea, once known as "the clap" or "the drip," is a STD caused by the bacterium *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*. The bacteria grow and multiply easily in the warm, moist areas of the reproductive tract, including the vagina, cervix, uterus, and fallopian tubes in women, and in the urethra in women and men. The bacterium also can grow in the mouth, throat, eyelid lining, rectum, and anus.

How common is gonorrhea?

Second only to Chlamydia, gonorrhea is a common bacterial infectious disease that affects more than 700,000 persons in the U.S. annually. Following implementation of the gonorrhea control program in the early 1970s, these numbers declined significantly from one million new cases reported yearly. The decline was highest among older white adults, while the disease rates for teenagers, African Americans, and Hispanics remain high. The rate of gonorrhea is highest in the South. Men who have sex with men also are at high risk for gonorrhea. Seventy-five percent of all reported cases are among young people aged 15-29.

How is gonorrhea transmitted?

Gonorrhea is transmitted through vaginal or cervical secretions and semen during unprotected sexual intercourse with an infected person. Ejaculation does not have to occur for gonorrhea to be transmitted or acquired. Even a woman who has not had anal sex can get gonorrhea in the anus or rectum if the bacteria are spread from the vaginal area, such as when wiping with toilet tissue. Eye infections in adults also may result when discharge carries the disease into the eye during sex or hand-to-eye contact. People who have had gonorrhea and received treatment may be re-infected if they have sexual contact with a person infected with gonorrhea. The risk of getting gonorrhea increases with the number of sexual partners and with unprotected sexual intercourse and outer-course.

Gonorrhea can also be transmitted from mother to newborn during delivery. This can result in eye infections, pneumonia, or other complications. In children, gonorrhea may be a possible sign of sexual abuse.

Contrary to some beliefs, gonorrhea is not transmitted through casual contact such as hugging, shaking hands, sharing food, using the same eating utensils, drinking from the same glass, sitting on public toilets, or touching door knobs.

What are the signs and symptoms of gonorrhea?

The symptoms of gonorrhea are similar to those of Chlamydia and are called gonococcal urethritis. Eighty percent of women and ten percent of men experience no symptoms at all. (They are asymptomatic.) Therefore, many people are unaware that they are infected. When symptoms do occur, men and women may experience them differently. Men may show some signs within two to five days after infection or some symptoms can take as long as 30 days to appear. Symptoms and signs may include a burning sensation when urinating, more frequent urination than usual, pain or swelling of the testicles, or a white, yellow, or green (pus-like) discharge from the penis. Many men may not take these seriously because the symptoms may appear only early in the day and can be mild.

Most women infected with gonorrhea are asymptomatic. Women who develop symptoms will do so within 10 days of infection. Those demonstrating symptoms may have mild experiences. Even when a woman has symptoms, they can be so non-specific as to be mistaken for a bladder or vaginal infection. The initial symptoms and signs in women include a painful or burning sensation when urinating, more frequent urination, increased vaginal (yellowish or yellow-green) discharge, vaginal bleeding between periods, menstrual irregularities, pain during intercourse, abdominal or low back pain, swelling or tenderness of the vulva. Women who experience fever, nausea, or vomiting may indicate that the disease has spread to the fallopian tubes. Women with gonorrhea are at risk of developing serious complications from the infection, regardless of the presence or severity of symptoms.

Some symptoms may show in both infected men and women such as, a sore, red throat if the infection has spread to that part of the body; rectal discharge, anal itching, soreness, bleeding, or painful bowel movements; or, inflammation of the eyelid lining that could include redness, itching, and discharge from the eye. The most common symptoms in newborns include eye infections and pneumonia that normally develops five to 12 days after birth.

What are complications of gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is a serious health threat and, when untreated, can cause permanent health problems in both men and women. Up to 20 percent of men with untreated gonorrhea infection develop epididymitis and acute epididymitis can cause infertility. Ten to 20 percent of infected, untreated women (about one million annually) can develop pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID can include abdominal pain and fever or internal pus-filled pockets (abscesses). PID can cause infertility or an increased risk for a life-threatening ectopic pregnancy (where the fertilized egg grows outside the uterus—usually in a fallopian tube). Gonorrhea can cause a form of arthritis (disseminated gonococcal infection—DGI) in three percent of untreated men and women. Additionally, people with gonorrhea can contract HIV more easily.

How does gonorrhea affect a pregnant woman and her baby?

Pregnant women with untreated gonorrhea risk miscarriage, premature labor and birth, or possibly stillbirth. A pregnant woman infected with gonorrhea may transmit the infection to the baby as it passes through the birth canal during delivery. The infection can cause blindness, joint infection, or a life-threatening blood infection in the baby.

How is gonorrhea diagnosed?

Gonorrhea can be diagnosed through a urine test or through cultures of secretions collected from various body parts (cervix, urethra, penis, anus, or throat).

What is the treatment for gonorrhea?

Gonorrhea is easy to cure. There are antibiotic treatments that successfully treat gonorrhea. Many people with gonorrhea also have Chlamydia or another STD. Therefore, people with gonorrhea should be treated for other STDs simultaneously. While taking medication, it is critical that patients take all that is prescribed. Even though medications can stop the infection, it cannot repair permanent damage caused by the illness. The medication also does not create immunity from getting gonorrhea again if there is contact with an infected person. Sexual contact between the patient and all partners should discontinue until each are treated and cured.

How can gonorrhea be prevented?

The surest way to prevent an STD is to abstain from sexual intercourse, or to be in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected. When used consistently and correctly, condoms can help reduce the risk of transmission of gonorrhea.

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For information about specific STDs/STIs, below are sources to use:

**Alan Guttmacher Institute
(AGI)**

120 Wall Street, 21st Floor
New York, NY 10005
Phone: 212/248-1111
Fax: 212/248-1951
<http://www.agi-usa.org>

**American Social Health
Association (ASHA)**

P. O. Box 13827
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-
3827
Phone: 800-783-9877
<http://www.ashastd.org/>

**Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention – Sexually Transmitted
Disease - STD information and
referrals to STD Clinics**

CDC-INFO
Phone: 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-
4636); TTY: 888-232-6348 In English,
en Espanol
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/default.htm>

**CDC National Prevention
Information Network (NPIN)**

P.O. Box 6003
Rockville, MD 20849-6003
Phone: 800-458-5231;
Fax: 888-282-7681
1-800-243-7012 TTY
E-mail: info@cdcnpin.org

**The Henry J. Kaiser Family
Foundation**

2400 Sand Hill Road
Menlo Park, CA 94025
Phone: 650/854-9400
Fax: 650/854-4800
<http://www.kff.org>

National Herpes Hotline (NHH)

Open from 9 A.M. to 7 P.M., ET,
Monday - Friday.
Phone: 919/361-8488

**National HPV and Cervical
Cancer Prevention Hotline**

Open from 2 P.M. to 7 P.M., ET,
Monday - Friday.
Phone: 919/361-4848

**Planned Parenthood Federation
of America**

434 West 33rd St.
New York, NY 10001
212/541-7800
FAX: 212/245-1845
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/>

**Sexuality Information and
Education Council of the United
States (SIECUS)**

130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350
New York, New York 10036-7802
Phone: 212/819-9770
Fax: 212/819-9776
<http://www.siecus.org>

Virginia Department of Health

109 Governor Street
Richmond, VA 23219
VIRGINIA STD/AIDS HOTLINE
Phone: 800-533-4148
<http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/epidemiology/DiseasePrevention/factsheets.htm>