Gonorrhoea symptoms & treatment

FAST FACTS

- Gonorrhoea is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that is normally passed on through sex without a condom or sharing sex toys with someone who has the infection.

- Using male or female condoms and dental dams during sex will help to protect you from getting gonorrhoea.

- Many people with gonorrhoea don’t have any symptoms, so it’s important to get tested if you have had unprotected sex and think you might have it.

- Gonorrhoea is curable, but if left untreated it can cause other health problems.

What is gonorrhoea?

Gonorrhoea is a sexually transmitted infection (STI). It used to be known as ‘the clap’.

Gonorrhoea can be easily treated and cured with antibiotics. However if it isn’t treated, gonorrhoea can cause infertility (inability to have children) and other health conditions.
How do you get gonorrhoea?

Gonorrhoea is usually passed on through unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex.

You can also get gonorrhoea through close genital contact. This means you can get gonorrhoea from someone if your genitals touch, even if you don’t have sex or ejaculate (cum).

It’s also possible to have a gonorrhoea infection in your eye, if it comes into contact with semen (cum) or vaginal fluids from someone with the infection – but this is rare.

Pregnant women can pass the infection onto their babies at birth. If you’re pregnant and think you may have gonorrhoea, it’s important to get tested as soon as possible so you can be treated before the baby is born.

Gonorrhoea can’t be passed on through kissing, hugging, sharing towels or using the same toilet as someone with the infection.

How can you prevent gonorrhoea?

Using a new male or female condom or dental dam every time you have vaginal, anal or oral sex is the best way to protect yourself from getting gonorrhoea.

Gonorrhoea can be passed on by sharing sex toys. Always cover sex toys with a new condom and wash them after use to reduce your risk of getting gonorrhoea and other STIs.

Having regular STI tests is one of the best ways to look after your sexual health. If you are having sex with multiple partners, it’s even more important to use condoms and get tested regularly.

The contraceptive pill and other forms of contraception (apart from condoms) won’t protect you from gonorrhoea, neither will PrEP.

What are the symptoms of gonorrhoea?

Many people with gonorrhoea don’t have any symptoms. If you do get symptoms, you will normally notice them within 10 days of infection, but they can occur many months later.

Gonorrhoea symptoms in women include:

- unusual thick and green or yellow discharge from the vagina
- pain or burning when urinating (peeing)
- pain in the lower abdomen
- bleeding between periods and/or heavier periods
- bleeding after sex – this is rare.

Gonorrhoea symptoms in men include:

- unusual discharge from the penis that may be white, yellow or green in colour
- pain or burning when urinating (peeing)
- inflammation or swelling of the foreskin
- pain in the testicles – this is rare.

You can also get gonorrhoea in your anus (bottom), eyes or throat. Both women and men can experience pain, swelling or discharge in the anus, or inflammation (redness) of the eye (called conjunctivitis). Gonorrhoea in the throat doesn’t normally have any symptoms.

**How do I test for gonorrhoea?**

You can get tested for gonorrhoea even if you don’t have any symptoms.

For women, a healthcare professional will usually take a swab from either the lower part of the womb (cervix) or the vagina. Men usually need to provide a urine (pee) sample and/or a swab taken from the tip of the penis (urethra). If you have had anal or oral sex, you may have a swab taken from the anus (bottom) or throat.

If you test positive for gonorrhoea, it is important to tell your recent sexual partner/s so they can also get tested and treated. Your healthcare professional can advise you on this. You should also be tested for other STIs.

**When should I get tested for gonorrhoea?**

You can get tested for gonorrhoea within a few days of having sex, although sometimes you may have to wait up to a week. If you have had sex without a condom, or you are worried about gonorrhoea or other STIs, speak to your healthcare professional about getting tested as soon as possible.

**How is gonorrhoea treated?**

Gonorrhoea is usually treated with a short course of antibiotics.

It’s important to not have sex again until you and your current sexual partner/s have finished treatment and a healthcare professional says you can.

Even if you’ve been treated for gonorrhoea, you are not immune and can get it again.

**Long-term effects of untreated gonorrhoea**

If left untreated, gonorrhoea can lead to other health problems.

In women it can cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID is an infection that can cause pelvic pain, infertility (inability to get pregnant), and ectopic pregnancy (pregnancy outside the uterus) which can be life-threatening. PID can be treated with antibiotics.

In pregnant women, gonorrhoea can cause miscarriage and premature labour. The mother can pass it on to her unborn baby. Gonorrhoea can be more dangerous in babies, as it can cause eye infections such as conjunctivitis, which in serious cases can lead to blindness.

In men untreated gonorrhoea can cause an infection in the testicles called epididymitis. This can
result in fever, scrotal pain and swelling and, in rare cases, infertility.

In rare cases, for both women and men, untreated gonorrhoea can spread to other parts of the body. This can cause inflammation and swelling of joints and tendons, skin irritation and redness, and inflammation around the brain and spinal cord (meningitis) or the heart.

Gonorrhoea and HIV

Having an STI, including gonorrhoea, increases your risk of getting HIV.

If you are living with HIV and also have gonorrhoea, your viral load is likely to increase. This will make you more likely to pass on HIV if you have sex without a condom, even if you are on treatment.

However, if you have an undetectable viral load (because you’re taking antiretrovirals) there is no evidence that gonorrhoea makes you more likely to pass on HIV.

If you are taking antiretrovirals it is important to discuss with your doctor how treatment for gonorrhoea may interact with your HIV drugs.

If you are worried about HIV infection, find out everything you need to know in our HIV Transmission and Prevention section.

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Sources:
NHS (2018) 'Gonorrhoea'
THT (2019) 'Gonorrhoea'