

New York State Department of Health

Chlamydia

Last Reviewed: November 2006

What is chlamydia?

(kluh-mih-dee-uh)

Chlamydia is one of the most common sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Each year more than 3 million Americans get this disease. Any sexually active person can be infected with chlamydia.

However, this infection is most common among adolescents and young adults (ages 15-24) who have new or multiple sex partners and who do not consistently and correctly use latex or polyurethane condoms every time they have oral, vaginal or anal sex.

What causes chlamydia?

Chlamydia is caused by the bacteria (*Chlamydia trachomatis*) that enter the body during sexual activity and can lead to infection of the genitals (penis or vagina). It can also infect the mouth or anus following oral or anal sex. Most of the time chlamydia is a "silent" infection meaning it doesn't cause any symptoms. In women, even with no symptoms, chlamydia can lead to permanent damage of the fallopian tubes and is the leading cause of infertility (women not being able to get pregnant) in the United States.

Chlamydia is spread through unprotected sex with someone who is already infected. A pregnant woman can also pass the infection to her child during the baby's passage through the birth canal.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Seventy-five percent of women and up to 50 percent of men have no symptoms. Most people who have chlamydia do not know it. That's why they may not seek health care. If you do have symptoms they usually start within 60 days after you have sex with an infected person. Most often, they appear one to three weeks after you're infected.

Women's symptoms may include:

- A yellow-white vaginal discharge (pus) that comes from an infected cervix
- Small amounts of blood (spotting) and/or bleeding between periods
- Unusual fluid from the urinary opening (urethral discharge)
- A burning feeling or pain when urinating

Men's symptoms may include:

- Pus from the penis (urethral discharge)
- Irritation or itching, with or without a burning feeling, when urinating. This is called urethritis.

Can chlamydia cause other problems if it's not treated?

Yes! Untreated chlamydia in women can lead to infection in other parts of your reproductive system. This infection is called pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). If you have PID it can cause abdominal pain, fever, and possible infertility (the inability to have children), ectopic pregnancy (a pregnancy outside the uterus), and

chronic pelvic pain. In men, untreated chlamydia can cause urethral infection, and complications such as swollen and tender testicles (epididymitis), which may result in sterility (inability to make sperm and father children).

A pregnant woman with chlamydia can give the infection to her baby during vaginal delivery. Health care providers give medicated eye drops to ALL newborns in New York State soon after birth. This prevents the newborn from getting an eye infection caused by chlamydia or gonorrhea. About one of every four newborn babies delivered through the birth canal of an infected woman will get chlamydia pneumonia (lung infection).

A chlamydia infection increases your chance of getting other STDs, such as gonorrhea or HIV.

How will I know if I have chlamydia?

Since most women and many men do not have symptoms, it is important for all sexually active persons to have regular examinations so that a clinician can take specimens to screen for possible chlamydia infection.

A clinician will take a sample from the site of infection (e. g., urethra, cervix, rectum, and/or the eye) using a swab and then test it for the bacteria. New tests are available that use urine samples to test for chlamydia. However, this urine testing is not available at all provider offices. Ask your doctor if this test is available.

Is there a cure for chlamydia?

Yes. Chlamydia can be easily treated and cured with antibiotics. Your provider will give you a one-time dose of azithromycin (az ith roe mye' sin) or a week of doxycycline (dox i sye' kleen) that should be taken twice a day. Other antibiotics are available but they are not as effective. They all need to be taken for seven days. If you finish your medicine and you still have symptoms, return to your provider.

When can I have sex again?

If you have been treated for chlamydia, you should not have oral, anal or vaginal sex until seven days after your treatment is over. If your sex partners are being treated for this STD, you should wait to have sex until seven days after they take all of their medicine. You can get chlamydia again if you don't wait seven days or if your sex partners don't get treated.

What about my partner(s)?

Chlamydia is a sexually transmitted disease – your sexual partners should be both checked and treated for this disease even if no symptoms are present.

Can I get this infection again?

Yes. Past infection with chlamydia does not make a person immune to the disease. From the time a person is infected with chlamydia, he or she can spread the disease and continues to do so until properly treated. If your partner(s) are not properly treated before you have oral, vaginal or anal sex, or if you have oral, vaginal or anal sex without condoms (unprotected sex) you place yourself at risk for another infection.

How do I prevent chlamydia?

Not having sex (abstinence) is the only sure way to avoid infection.

To lower your chances of giving or getting chlamydia, use a latex or polyurethane condom every time you have oral, vaginal or anal sex. Using condoms will not totally stop your risk of giving or getting chlamydia.

This is because condoms are not 100 percent effective. However, condoms greatly lower your risk of getting chlamydia. They also help prevent the spread of other STDs including HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

If you think you're infected, or you have been exposed, do not have oral, vaginal or anal sex. You and your sex partner(s) should visit a health care provider for full physical checkups. These include a complete sexual history and testing for common STDs. You and your partner(s) should be checked for gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis, herpes, genital warts, trichomoniasis, and HIV. The only way to protect yourself is by taking good care of your health. Your sex partners should also take good care of their health.

Will anyone know the results of the exams?

Your test results and any treatment will be kept absolutely confidential. No one can find out your results, except you. If you are under 18 you can be checked and treated for STDs without getting permission from your parents.

To learn more:

If you have any more questions about chlamydia, or you need to know the location of the nearest clinic, contact your local health department.

You may also call the National STD Hotline at 1-800-CDC-INFO 1-800-232-4636.

Questions or comments: stdc@health.state.ny.us

Revised: May 2005