

Chlamydia

Chlamydia is the most common sexually transmissible infection (STI) in Australia, particularly among young men and women, with more than half of cases occurring in the 15 to 25 age group. As many people don't realise they are infected, chlamydia can be easily passed on through unprotected sex.

There were more than 35,000 new cases of chlamydia reported in 2004*.

Cause

Chlamydia is caused by a bacterium called *Chlamydia trachomatis*.

It can infect the urethra, cervix (entrance to the womb) and rectum in women, and the penis and rectum in men. It can also infect the throat in both men and women.

Symptoms

Many people (between 50 and 75%) with chlamydia experience no symptoms at all. Where symptoms are present, they can take some time to develop.

The majority of women experience no symptoms. Others sometimes notice:

Unusual vaginal discharge

A burning sensation when urinating

Painful sex

Abnormal vaginal bleeding eg at unexpected times or heavier/more painful than usual

Vaginal itching/soreness

Lower abdominal pain.

Men are more likely than women to experience symptoms. Symptoms can include:

Pain when urinating

A discharge from the penis

Itching inside the urethra

Pain in the testicles or rectum

Pain with ejaculation.

Both men and women may experience a sore throat if the throat area is infected with chlamydia.

How is it transmitted?

Chlamydia is transmitted through an exchange of body fluids (semen, blood and vaginal fluids) during unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sexual activity.

Chlamydia can also be spread from a mother with chlamydia to her baby at birth.

It can't be caught from sharing towels, toilet seats or swimming pools.

How do I know if I have it?

The only way to know for sure if you have chlamydia is to get tested by a doctor. If you have no symptoms, a urine test is usually all that is required, though a vaginal swab is often still recommended for women (you can take this yourself if you feel more comfortable). Where a man has symptoms such as discharge from the penis, swabs are taken of the discharge and possibly from the opening at the end of the penis. **For more information about STI testing go to www.fpwa.org.au/stitests.htm**

Your doctor may also test for gonorrhoea, as it is often present at the same time as chlamydia.

It is important to remember that a Pap smear only tests for changes to the cervix, and not for STIs. It is possible, however, to be tested for STIs at the same time as your Pap smear - talk to your clinician for more details.

Treatment/Management

Treatment for early chlamydia usually involves a single dose of antibiotics, however more advanced cases (causing symptoms of pain or discharge) may require a longer course.

Sex should be avoided for one week after treatment and retesting for chlamydia after treatment is advisable. Reinfection from untreated partners is quite common, therefore all sexual partners should be tested and treated also.

Why is treatment important?

If chlamydia is left untreated it can lead to infertility in both men and women.

For women, the most serious danger from chlamydia is that it can spread into the fallopian tubes and cause pelvic inflammatory disease (blocked tubes).

In men, inflammation of the epididymis (the thin tube leading from the testes to the vas deferens where the sperm mature) may develop causing it to become painful and swollen. This can lead to infertility if left untreated.

Having chlamydia also increases your chances of contracting other infections, such as HIV.

Prevention

Using condoms and dams reduces the risk of contracting chlamydia (a dam is a thin latex square held over the vaginal or anal area during oral sex). They stop body fluids like semen, blood and vaginal fluids from being exchanged. **For more information about condoms and dams go to www.fpwa.org.au/infotable.htm**

Many people with chlamydia don't have any symptoms and are therefore unaware of the risk of passing it on. If you've had unprotected sex in the past, get tested by a doctor or at FPWA.

**2005 Annual Surveillance Report: HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis and Sexually Transmissible Infections in Australia*

For more information about chlamydia contact the **Sexual Health Helpline** on 9227 6178 or 1800 198 205 (country callers) or email sexhelp@fpwa.org.au

Practising safe sex reduces the risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs).



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Sexual Health Helpline (08) 9227 6178 or 1800 198 205 (Country Callers)
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