

Chlamydia

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What is chlamydia?

Chlamydia is the most common sexually transmitted bacterial infection in the United States. It is caused by the bacterium *Chlamydia trachomatis*.

How does it occur?

The chlamydia microorganism is passed from person to person during sexual intercourse or intimate contact with the genitals or rectal area.

Condoms are very effective in preventing chlamydia transmission. Symptoms of chlamydial infections may appear two weeks to a month after exposure to an infected sexual partner. However, since the condition can be asymptomatic (showing no signs), sometimes evidence of infection may be found only during specific testing or when a sexual partner is diagnosed. Chlamydia can remain asymptomatic for a widely variable amount of time (even up to several years), making it difficult sometimes to determine which sexual contact resulted in the infection.

How is it diagnosed?

Chlamydia is diagnosed by testing sites of contact: throat (pharyngeal), vagina and rectum. Testing of urine is available too.

When to test: at least one week after contact with partner

[

For people with penises

Chlamydia commonly causes non-gonococcal urethritis (NGU, also known as non-specific urethritis or NSU). NGU is a condition in which the urethra becomes inflamed. Less frequently, chlamydia causes infections of the prostate gland (prostatitis), the testicles (epididymitis), and inflammation of the rectum and anus (proctitis).

Approximately 70% of people with penises have **no** symptoms if they have a chlamydia infection. If symptoms are present, they can be mild and intermittent.

Symptoms for people with penises may include:

- burning when urinating (most common)
- pain with ejaculation
- discharge from the penis
- pain/swelling in the testicles or scrotum
- irritation and itching around the urinary opening of the penis
- rectal pain

For people with vaginas

In people with vaginas, chlamydia may cause urethritis (infection of the tube that conducts urine from the bladder) as well as cervicitis (inflammation of the cervix). If untreated,

chlamydial infections may ascend into the reproductive tract and cause a more serious condition called pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID is an infection of the uterus and/or fallopian tubes which may damage the reproductive organs and can cause infertility.

Approximately 90% of people with vaginas have **no** symptoms until the infection is more advanced.

Symptoms for people with vaginas may include:

- burning during urination
- frequent urination
- abnormal vaginal discharge, itch, or irritation
- lower abdominal pain
- Fever
- painful sexual activity or intercourse
- vaginal spotting after intercourse or between periods

How is chlamydia treated?

Chlamydia is curable with antibiotics. It is important to take *all* of the medication you are given, even if the symptoms start to go away before you've taken all the pills. If you stop taking the medicine, you may leave some of the infection in your body.

It is very important that any sexual partner(s) within the last 60 days be treated as well. If you are treated and a sexual partner is not, you may become reinfected. If you are given a single dose of antibiotics, this means no sexual activity for seven days after taking the medicine. If given

a longer course, you should abstain for the duration of the medication period. During treatment, it is important to abstain from intercourse and from any exchange of genital fluids. After treatment, using a barrier method (condom, dental dam) during sexual contact is the best way to prevent reinfection.

Repeat infection with chlamydia is common. It is important to be retested for chlamydia three months after treatment to check for re-infection, even if your partner was treated.

Special considerations:

If symptoms persist for more than a few days after treatment, go to a health care provider for evaluation.

Expedited partner treatment is available in the State of Rhode Island. Health care providers may treat sexual partners of people diagnosed with chlamydia without examining them. Speak to your health care provider if your partners are unable to be seen by their own provider.

References: CDC website 2022 Sexually transmitted disease treatment guidelines. "Up to Date: Beyond the basics - Chlamydia"