Gonorrhoea

Looking after your sexual health
Gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea is a bacterial sexually transmitted infection (STI). It can be painful and can cause serious health problems such as infertility in both men and women.

This booklet gives you information about gonorrhoea, what you can do if you are worried that you might have the infection and advice on how to protect yourself.

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What causes gonorrhoea?
Gonorrhoea is caused by bacteria which are found mainly in the semen and vaginal fluids of men and women who have the infection. Gonorrhoea is easily passed from one person to another through sexual contact. Anyone who is sexually active can get it and pass it on. You don’t need to have lots of sexual partners.

How is gonorrhoea passed on?
Gonorrhoea is usually passed from one person to another during sex. The bacteria can live inside the cells of the cervix (entrance to the uterus), the urethra (tube where urine comes out), the rectum, the throat and occasionally the eyes. You can become infected with gonorrhoea if you come into contact with infected semen or infected discharge from the vagina, throat or
rectum.

The infection is most commonly spread through:

- unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex
- sharing sex toys if you don’t wash them or cover them with a new condom each time they’re used.

Gonorrhoea can also be passed from a pregnant woman to her baby (see What happens if I get gonorrhoea when I’m pregnant? on page 13).

In women it is possible for the bacteria to spread in the vaginal secretions, to the rectum. You don’t need to have anal sex for this to happen.

Gonorrhoea bacteria that come into contact with the eye can cause conjunctivitis. This is uncommon in adults.

It is not clear if gonorrhoea can be spread by transferring the bacteria to another person’s genitals on the fingers or through rubbing vulvas (female genitals) together.

You cannot catch gonorrhoea from kissing, hugging, sharing baths or towels, swimming pools, toilet seats or from sharing cups, plates or cutlery.

What are the signs and symptoms?

You may not notice any obvious signs or symptoms if you have been infected with gonorrhoea. Signs and symptoms can show up 1–14 days after coming into contact with gonorrhoea, many months later, or not until the infection spreads to other parts of your body. You might notice:

Women

- An unusual vaginal discharge which may be thin or watery, yellow or green.
- Pain when passing urine.
• Lower abdominal pain or tenderness.
• Rarely, bleeding between periods or heavier periods (including women who are using hormonal contraception).

Men
• An unusual discharge from the tip of the penis – the discharge may be white, yellow or green.
• Pain when passing urine.
• Rarely, pain or tenderness in the testicles.

Men and women
• Infection in the rectum. This does not usually have any signs and symptoms but may cause anal pain, discomfort or discharge.
• Infection in the throat. This usually has no symptoms.
• Infection in the eyes. This can cause pain, swelling, irritation and discharge (conjunctivitis).

How will I know if I have the infection?
You can only be certain you have gonorrhoea if you have a test. If you think you may have gonorrhoea it is important that you don’t delay getting a test.

You may wish to have a test if:
• you have, or think you might have, symptoms
• you have recently had unprotected sex with a new partner
• you or your partner have had unprotected sex with other partners
• during a vaginal examination your doctor or nurse says that the cells of the cervix are
inflamed and/or there is an unusual discharge

- a sexual partner tells you they have a sexually transmitted infection
- you have another sexually transmitted infection
- you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy.

You could still have gonorrhoea even if your partner has tested negative – you should not rely on a partner’s negative test result.

If you have had gonorrhoea and it has been treated, you will not be immune to the infection – you can get it again.

If you have gonorrhoea you may wish to be tested for other sexually transmitted infections as you can have more than one sexually transmitted infection at the same time. Having an infection such as gonorrhoea can mean you are more at risk of becoming infected with HIV or transmitting it if you are HIV positive.

**How soon after sex can I have a test?**

It is important not to delay getting a test if you think you might have gonorrhoea. It is possible to do a gonorrhoea test within a few days of having sex but sometimes you may be advised to wait up to a week after having sex. You can test for gonorrhoea even if there are no symptoms.

**What does the test involve?**

There are different ways of testing for gonorrhoea.

**Women**

- You may be asked to use a swab yourself to collect cells from the vulva (the lips around the opening to the vagina) and inside the vagina.
- A doctor or nurse may use a swab to collect
a sample of cells from the cervix during an internal examination, or from the vagina.

**Men**
- You may be asked to provide a urine sample. Before having this test you may be advised not to pass urine (pee) for 1–2 hours.

**Men and women**
- A doctor or nurse may use a swab to collect a sample of cells from the entrance of the urethra.
- If you have had anal or oral sex the doctor or nurse may use swabs to collect cells from your rectum and throat (you may be given the option to do your own tests). These swabs are not done routinely on everybody.
- If you have symptoms of conjunctivitis – discharge from the eye(s) – swabs will also be used to collect a sample of discharge from your eye(s).

A swab looks a bit like a cotton bud, but is smaller and rounded. It sometimes has a small plastic loop on the end rather than a cotton tip. It is wiped over the parts of the body that could be infected and easily picks up samples of discharge and cells. This only takes a few seconds and is not painful, though it may be uncomfortable for a moment.

Sometimes it is possible for a specimen to be looked at under the microscope immediately and for you to get the test result straight away. Otherwise you will have to wait up to two weeks to get your results.

Cervical smear tests and routine blood tests do **not** detect gonorrhoea. If you are not sure
whether you have been tested for gonorrhoea, just ask.

**How accurate are the tests?**
The accuracy of a gonorrhoea test depends on the kind of test used and which part of your body the sample is collected from.

As no test is 100 per cent accurate there is a small chance that the test will give a negative result when you do have the infection. This is known as a false negative result. This can sometimes explain why you might get a different result when you go to a different clinic to have another test or why you and your partner might get a different test result.

It is possible for some gonorrhoea tests to be positive if you haven't got gonorrhoea, but this is uncommon. If there are doubts about the result you may be offered a second test to confirm the presence of gonorrhoea.

**Where can I get a test?**
There are a number of services you can go to. Choose the service you feel most comfortable with.

A gonorrhoea test can be done at:
- a genitourinary medicine (GUM) or sexual health clinic
- your general practice
- some contraception and young people's clinics.

For information on how to find a service see page 15.

It is possible to buy a gonorrhoea test to do at home. The accuracy of these tests varies so it is recommended that you go to a sexual health
service to have a test. You can also choose to pay for a gonorrhoea test at a private clinic.

**Will I have to pay for tests and treatment?**
All tests are free through NHS services. Treatment is also free unless you go to your general practice when you may have to pay a prescription charge for the treatment.

**What is the treatment for gonorrhoea?**
The treatment for gonorrhoea is antibiotics. The treatment is at least 95 per cent effective.
- Treatment involves having an antibiotic injection and a single dose of antibiotic tablet(s).
- If there is a high chance you have the infection, treatment may be started before the results of the test are back. You will always be given treatment if your partner is found to have gonorrhoea.
- You may also need other treatment if complications have occurred.
- There is no evidence that complementary therapies can cure gonorrhoea.

**When will the signs and symptoms go away?**
You should notice an improvement in the signs and symptoms quite quickly.
- Discharge or pain when you urinate should improve within 2–3 days.
- Discharge and discomfort in the rectum should improve within 2–3 days.
- Bleeding between periods or heavier periods