Chlamydia is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STIs). If untreated it can become painful and cause serious health problems such as infertility. This leaflet gives you information about chlamydia, advice on how to protect yourself and how to get treated if you think that you might have the infection.

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What causes chlamydia?
Chlamydia is caused by bacteria, which are found in semen and vaginal fluid and are easily passed from one person to another through sexual contact. It is particularly common in younger people but anyone who is sexually active can get it. Both men and women can have, and pass on, chlamydia.

Often there are no symptoms or they may be so mild you do not know you have it.

How is chlamydia passed on?
Chlamydia can be passed from one person to another during sex. The bacteria can live inside the cells of the cervix (entrance to the womb), the urethra (tube where urine comes out), the rectum (back passage) and sometimes the throat and eyes.

The infection can spread if you have vaginal, anal or oral sex or share sex toys. Using a condom correctly will reduce your chance of getting or passing on chlamydia.

It is also possible to transfer the infection from the genital area to the eyes and for a pregnant woman to pass the infection to her baby.

It is not fully understood at the moment how possible or easy it is to spread the infection by transferring semen or vaginal fluid to another person’s genitals on the fingers or through rubbing vulvas together.

You cannot catch chlamydia from kissing, hugging, sharing baths or towels, from swimming pools, toilet seats or from sharing cups, plates or cutlery.
How can I protect myself from chlamydia?

- **Use condoms** (male or female) every time you have anal or vaginal sex.
- If you are not sure how to use condoms correctly, call **fpa** (see page 11) for a free leaflet.
- If you’re not happy with the condoms you are using now, why not try a different brand or type? They come in a variety of shapes and sizes.
- **Avoid sharing sex toys** – if they are shared wash them or cover them with a new condom before anyone else uses them.
- **For oral sex,** cover the penis with a condom or the female genitals with a latex square (dental dam).

These measures can also protect you from other STIs such as HIV and gonorrhoea. If you have chlamydia without knowing it they will also help prevent you from passing it on.

What are the symptoms?

At least half of all infected men and women will not have any symptoms at all. If you think you could have chlamydia then go for a check-up and encourage your partner to be checked for infection. GPs and clinics don’t mind doing check-ups.

Symptoms can show up 1-3 weeks after coming into contact with chlamydia, many months later or not until the infection spreads to other parts of your body. **If you do get symptoms you might notice:**

**Women**

- an unusual vaginal discharge
- pain when passing urine
• bleeding between periods (including women who are using hormonal contraception)
• bleeding after sex
• pain and/or bleeding when you have sex
• lower abdominal pain

Men
• a white/cloudy and watery discharge from the tip of the penis
• pain when passing urine
• painful swelling of the testicles

Infection in the rectum rarely has symptoms but may cause discomfort, and discharge in both men and women. If the eyes become infected you may experience pain, swelling, irritation and discharge (conjunctivitis). Infection in the throat usually has no symptoms.

If I don’t get symptoms how will I know if I have the infection?
You won’t know unless you have a chlamydia test. If you or your partner think you might have symptoms of an infection, you should both have a test. Even if you don’t have symptoms you may wish to be tested particularly if:
• you have had unprotected sex with a new partner recently
• you or your partner has had unprotected sex with other partners
• during a vaginal examination your doctor or nurse says that the cells of the cervix are inflamed or there is a discharge
• a sexual partner tells you they have an STI
• you are found to have another STI.
How soon after sex can I have a test?
Chlamydia will show up on the tests a few days after you have been in contact with it, often before you have any symptoms.

You can go to a genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinic, a sexual health clinic or to your GP. If your GP doesn’t offer testing, they will refer you to a clinic that does. Don’t delay seeking advice - clinics don’t mind doing “check-ups”. Tests are also available at some family planning clinics and young people’s services, call first to check.

It is not uncommon to have more than one infection so ask about being tested for others. A leaflet Sexually transmitted infections – where to go for help and advice is available free from fpa (see page 11).

What does the test involve?
A doctor or nurse will use a swab to collect a sample of cells. They may also ask you to provide a urine sample. There are many myths about how swabs are done. A swab looks a bit like a cotton bud, but is smaller and rounded. The swab is wiped over the parts of the body that could be infected and easily picks up samples of discharge and cells. It only takes a few seconds and is not usually painful, though it may be uncomfortable for a moment. Swabs may be used to pick up cells from:
- the cervix during an internal examination (in women)
- the urethra (tube where the urine comes out)
- the rectum (back passage)
- the throat
- the eye.
No tests are 100% accurate, but chlamydia tests should pick up almost all infections.

Cervical smear tests and routine blood tests do not detect infections such as chlamydia. If you are not sure whether you have been tested for chlamydia, just ask.

**What is the treatment for chlamydia?**

Early treatment of chlamydia is simple and involves taking a course of antibiotic tablets. There are several different antibiotics that can be used. These are taken as either a single dose or a longer course (up to two weeks). If complications have occurred other treatment may also be needed. If there is a high chance of you having the infection, treatment may be started before the results of the test are back. At the moment there aren’t any treatments that you can buy without a prescription and there currently isn’t any evidence that complementary therapies can cure chlamydia.

Some of the antibiotics that are used to treat chlamydia interact with the combined oral contraceptive pill. If you are taking the pill tell the doctor or nurse and they can advise you what to do. You should also tell the doctor or nurse if you are, or think you might be, pregnant or if you are breastfeeding. This will influence the type of antibiotic that is given to you.

**How effective is the treatment?**

Treatment is very effective. If you take all the antibiotics according to the instructions it is rare for them not to work. Avoid vaginal, anal and oral sex until you and your partner have both finished treatment, otherwise you could be re-infected.