Dear Alice,

What are the symptoms of gonorrhea?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Gonorrhea is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacteria *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*. The course of infection, its severity, and how easily it is recognized are different for women and men.

Although a person is more likely have noticeable symptoms when infected with gonorrhea (as compared to other STIs such as Chlamydia), one of the most common symptoms is *no symptom at all*. If someone does experience signs of gonorrhea, which are similar to those of Chlamydia, they often show up two to six days after exposure or infection.

In men, symptoms might include a yellowish discharge from the penis. Urination might be painful, or "burning," or more frequent. Untreated, gonorrhea can spread from the urethra to infect the prostate gland, seminal vesicles, Cowper's glands, and the epididymis, which, if inflamed and scarred, can lead to sterility.

In women, the urethra or cervix can be affected; sometimes the infection is so mild that it goes unnoticed, particularly with inflammation of the cervix. Other symptoms include a suddenly cloudy vaginal discharge, abnormal menstruation, painful urination, and/or lower abdominal discomfort. If the infection is left untreated, it can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), possibly resulting in ectopic pregnancy, pelvic abscesses, or infertility.

Gonorrhea can be transmitted through oral and anal sex as well as vaginal sex. Symptoms of an infection resulting from oral sex, could include sore throat, tonsillitis, or no symptoms at all. When transmitted by anal sex, there can be inflammation of the rectum or anus, itchiness, pus-like or bloody discharge, feeling the need to have a bowel movement often, or no noticeable signs whatsoever.

To diagnose this infection, health care providers use a urine test, a smear (cells swabbed from a bodily tissue and put on a slide that's looked at under a microscope), or grow a culture. Antibiotics are the standard treatment; depending on the strain of an infection, a health care provider may prescribe different types of antibiotics or treatment combinations. Since people
who have gonorrhea are also often infected with Chlamydia, they and their partner(s) may need to be treated for both infections at the same time.

When treating gonorrhea, it is critical to take the full course of antibiotics and return for a checkup four to seven days after finishing the medication to make sure treatment was effective. All sexual partners also need to be treated. Also, infected individuals should postpone vaginal, oral, or anal sex until after finishing treatment to avoid re-infection. On a prevention note, safer sex (especially condoms!) and regular check-ups can go a long way in guarding against gonorrhea and other STIs.

For more information about testing, visit a health care provider, local health department's clinic, or a health center such as Planned Parenthood [2] for testing and treatment. Whenever you think you may have an infection, or notice strange symptoms, it's a great idea to talk with your health care provider.

Take care,

Alice!

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