Ouch! Burning pee! Is this a urinary tract infection (UTI)? [1]

Alice,

I think I may have some kind of urinary tract infection. It came on very suddenly, about three nights ago. And when I pee, there is a burning sensation when my bladder has almost emptied. It's not an STD because I'm in a monogamous relationship, and yes, I'm sure! Please help.

Thank you.

— Burning Up

Answer

Dear Burning Up,

It seems as though you may be in a common, yet uncomfortable situation. In fact, urinary tract infections (UTIs) are so common that many folks get at least one at some point in their lives. There are two common types of UTIs: cystitis and urethritis. In general, they’re usually caused by bacteria (many different types of bacteria), such as *E. coli*, which travel from the gastrointestinal tract to the urethra, bladder, and sometimes the kidneys. And, though you mention you believe you're not at risk for sexually transmitted infections [2], it's the case that some can cause UTIs, including *gonorrhea* [3] and chlamydia. Other issues can also increase the risk for this pesky infection: having a suppressed immune system, sexual activity, some forms of contraception, having diabetes, going through menopause, recent surgery, catheter use, having an atypical or blocked urethra (the tube that urine passes through to exit the body), and having had a UTI before. Knowing for sure that you've got a UTI often includes a visit to a medical provider for a diagnosis and recommended treatment.

No matter what part of the urinary system is specifically infected, UTI symptoms may include:

- Feeling like you need to pee every few minutes
- Burning when you try to pee
- Needing to pee with hardly anything coming out
- Smelly, cloudy, dark, or bloody urine
- Lower back or abdominal pain
- Pelvic pressure

[1] Published on *Go Ask Alice!* (https://goaskalice.columbia.edu)
Discharge

A UTI can usually be diagnosed through a physical exam and a urine sample tested for certain types of bacteria. Treatment usually involves a course of antibiotics, the specific type depending on the bacteria causing the infection. The good news is that folks tend to start feeling a bit better after about a day or two of antibiotics, though it’s key to take the full course prescribed so that the infection is adequately treated. Left untreated though, UTIs can lead to serious infections of the kidneys (which may be indicated by additional symptoms such as fever, nausea, vomiting, and chills) — so it’s key to seek out medical attention when it’s suspected. Over-the-counter pain relievers and the use of a heating pad may also relieve some discomfort. Some folks experience frequent UTIs, which may also be addressed by some do-it-yourself risk reduction strategies and potentially preventative antibiotics as directed by a health care provider.

To prevent UTIs and reduce the risk of recurrence, some of these self-help measures are worth trying:

- Drink plenty of fluids, particularly water, every day.
- Urinate frequently, emptying the bladder completely each time.
- Wipe from front to back after a bowel movement to keep bowel bacteria away from your urethra (for those with a vagina).
- Wash hands before having sex, before touching the vagina, and after contact with the anus.
- Pee before and after sex.
- Avoid products that may irritate the vagina or vulva, such as douches, feminine sprays, or powders.
- Wear loose clothing.
- Sip on some cranberry juice (though the research isn’t conclusive about its effectiveness for prevention or treatment).
- Consider your birth control method — using barrier methods (e.g., condoms) may reduce contact with certain bacteria, but other forms of contraception (e.g., diaphragms and spermicidal lubricants) may contribute to bacteria growth.

This common condition certainly isn't pleasant; however, it's pretty common and treatable. By tuning in to your body, seeking out care when needed, and following the care tips listed, you can get on the path to fewer pesky pee-related issues in the future.

Alice!
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