C'mon, tell me about chlamydia [1]

1) Dear Alice,

What exactly is chlamydia? How is it transmitted? Can you get it through oral sex (man on woman)? How is it treated (especially in the case of males)?

Help!

— Need to know asap!!!

2) Dear Alice,

Could you tell me about the symptoms of chlamydia and if one test is enough to detect that disease? Thank you.

— Curious

Answer

Dear Need to know asap!!! and Curious,

Sounds like it's time to talk about the who, what, where, when, and why of this STI (sexually transmitted infection). Chlamydia is a common STI caused by the bacteria *Chlamydia trachomatis*. It usually infects the genitals but can also cause infection in other areas, such as the anus and throat. Transmission of the bacteria occurs when mucous membranes come in contact with the infected fluids (e.g., vaginal fluids, semen, and pre-ejaculate) of someone carrying the infection. Curious, there is a test that can detect chlamydia. And, if test results come back positive, don’t fret — the infection can be treated and cured with the proper use of antibiotics. Read on to learn a bit more about what symptoms to look out for, testing, treatment, and preventing a chlamydial infection.
Although it can spread through all forms of sex, chlamydia is less likely to spread through oral sex than vaginal or anal sex because the bacterium that causes chlamydia prefers to target the genitals rather than the throat. On that note, Need to know asap!!!, while it's possible to spread the infection from mouth-to-penis or penis-to-mouth, it's less likely. The infection is even less likely to be transmitted from the vagina or anus to the mouth or vice versa.

Curious, a chlamydial infection is typically asymptomatic (i.e., when an infection is present, but symptoms aren’t experienced), so it can be difficult to tell if someone has acquired it from looking at symptoms alone. That being said, some symptoms that may be associated include:

- Vaginal or penile discharge
- Lower abdominal pain
- Painful urination
- Testicular pain in men
- Bleeding between periods and after sex in women
- Painful penetrative sex

*List adapted from Mayo Clinic [2].*

To know where you stand with this bacteria, getting an annual check-up with a health care provider where you can request to be tested for STIs is recommended. This is especially crucial since those infected with chlamydia may not even know it. You can also visit a sexual health clinic or student health center to request testing.

If you're tested for chlamydia, a health care provider may either collect a swab from the infected area (i.e., vagina, cervix, or urethra) or ask for a urine sample. If an infection is suspected in the throat or rectum, swab samples may be taken at those sites. The collected swab(s) or sample(s) are then sent to a lab to be analyzed. For those with a cervix, it may be possible to swab your own cervix if you feel more comfortable, and studies have found that self-swabbing isn't less effective at getting an adequate sample.

Chlamydia treatment is the same regardless of genitalia. If left untreated, chlamydia can develop into further complications, which can include pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) [3] for those with a cervix and urethritis [4] or epididymitis [5] in for those with a penis. To reduce the risk of getting chlamydia (and, in turn, any potential complications), the use of condoms [6] and dental dams [7] (for oral sex) is recommended.

For even more information on chlamydia and other STIs, check out the Go Ask Alice! Sexual and Reproductive Health [8] archives. Knowledge is power — and pleasure!

Alice!
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