

What is cervicitis? ^[1]

Alice,

What is cervicitis? How is it formed? Is it an STD or bacteria from normal vaginas?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Cervicitis is inflammation of the cervix (the base of the uterus that opens into the back of the vagina) and can be acute or chronic. Acute cervicitis can be caused by a sexually transmitted infection (STI) — most commonly chlamydia or gonorrhea, but other cases may be caused by herpes or trichomoniasis ^[2]. The condition may also occur as a result of a change in the balance of bacteria in the vagina (i.e., bacterial vaginosis). However, it's been noted that a large proportion of acute cases have causes that are not able to be identified. With regard to chronic cervicitis, physical or chemical irritation is the typical culprit. Ill-fitted diaphragms, tampons, and cervical caps can result in physical irritation to the cervix. Certain chemicals that come in contact with the vagina, including those in latex condoms, spermicides, tampons, or douches may also contribute to inflammation. In both acute and chronic cases, symptoms can range from mild to severe and can include:

- Vaginal discharge that may contain pus or mucus, have a strong smell, or become heavier right after menstruation
- Sporadic vaginal bleeding between periods (or “spotting”) or, more commonly, after penetrative sex
- Genital itching and burning, pelvic pain, or pain during intercourse
- Painful or frequent urination
- Lower back pain

Cervicitis can be a challenge to diagnose because symptoms may not be immediately identified or be present at all. In these cases, it's usually diagnosed by a health care provider during routine gynecological care. If symptoms are experienced and a health care provider suspects cervicitis, they may conduct a pelvic exam (to look for inflammation and any atypical vaginal discharge) and screenings (including STI tests and a Pap smear) to determine the root cause of the reported symptoms.

When it comes to a positive diagnosis, treatment of the condition depends on the cause and severity. Inflammation caused by bacteria is usually treated with antibiotics. On that note, if the bacteria is associated with an STI, it's good to know that they tend to travel together — meaning an infection with one STI puts a person at a higher risk for other infections. As such, folks who've been diagnosed with cervicitis, as well as their current sexual partner(s), are advised to be counseled, tested, and treated for other STIs. Because of this risk, it may also be wise to avoid having sex until treatment is completed. In most chronic cases, inflammation can be resolved by removing and avoiding what's causing the irritation. As a last resort, those with persistent inflammation may be treated by removing the affected parts of the cervix, once cervical cancer has been ruled out through a biopsy.

Though regular visits with a health care provider are generally recommended, it may be strongly recommended in the case of cervicitis because of its persistency or the possibility that it will return. Seeing a health care provider regularly will aid in early detection and treatment, which can prevent any inflammation from spreading to other reproductive areas, leading to other reproductive conditions, such as infertility, pregnancy loss, and preterm birth. Follow-up appointments can also determine whether a given treatment has been successful.

Lastly, as far as prevention, reducing the risk of sexually transmitted cervicitis may be done through the use of barrier methods, such as condoms [3], and having a mutually monogamous sexual relationship (where a person only has sex with one other person and vice versa). Avoiding irritants such as douches and scented tampons may also be in order. And, speaking of tampons, using them correctly by following the manufacturer's guidelines can help ensure that the any irritation risk is minimized.

Order up on this serving of cervicitis information!

Alice!

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