



Chlamydia

What is chlamydia?

Chlamydia trachoma is a bacterium that causes sexually transmitted infections in men and women. It can also cause a chronic eye infection and pneumonia, but these will not be dealt with in this leaflet. It is important for anyone who is sexually active to know about chlamydia infection as it is the most common bacterial sexually transmitted infection in developed countries such as Australia. Chlamydia can cause significant disease and even infertility.

Who can get it and how is it spread?

Chlamydia is spread by any genital contact from a person who has the infection, in particular by vaginal or anal intercourse. Anyone who has contact with an infected person in this way can get the infection, irrespective of age. However chlamydia is most common in the most sexually active age groups (18-24 yrs) and in those who change partners frequently.

A mother who has chlamydia at the time of giving birth can infect her baby during delivery (resulting in pneumonia or conjunctivitis).

It takes from one to three weeks after a person has caught the infection for symptoms to appear. However some women can carry it for a long time without having any symptoms of the infection and some men only get minimal symptoms. These people may not know they are infected.

What are the symptoms of chlamydia?

In men, there may be no symptoms, or there may be:

- stinging or burning sensation when passing urine (urethritis);
- discharge from the penis that may be white, mucousy or yellow;
- itching at the tip of the penis;
- pain, tenderness or redness of the testicles (epididymitis).

In women, there may be no symptoms, or there may be:

- stinging or burning passing urine (this may only last a few days);
- discharge from the vagina which may be yellow and possibly have an odour;
- pain in the pelvic area or lower abdomen, possibly with fever and feeling unwell (pelvic inflammatory disease);
- pain during sexual intercourse;
- heavier than usual periods or bleeding between periods.

Other symptoms in both sexes:

- discharge from the anus and pain on opening the bowels (proctitis);
- soreness, itching and discharge from the eyes (conjunctivitis);
- joint pain (due to either septic arthritis or Reiter's syndrome, which may be delayed in onset).

What tests are done for chlamydia?

If the doctor thinks you may have chlamydia, the most common test is on a urine sample. Swabs from the penis are rarely if ever needed. For women, swabs may be taken from the cervix at the time of a Pap smear, or from the urinary opening. Sometimes an anal swab is required. Your doctor may advise a retest six weeks after treatment to be sure the infection is gone.

Because it is possible to catch more than one sexually transmitted infection at a time, other tests may be done at the same time as chlamydia testing.

How is chlamydia treated?

Uncomplicated cases of infection can be treated with a single dose of antibiotics. These are usually well tolerated, even if pregnant. If pelvic inflammatory disease is diagnosed in a female, or epididymitis (pain, tenderness or red-

ness of the testicles) in the male, a 14-28 day course of treatment is needed.

Sexual partners, even those without symptoms should be treated and tested for other sexually transmitted infections also.

What are the complications of chlamydia?

- In women, infection in the fallopian tubes of the womb can lead to infertility (blockage from scarring).
- If pregnancy occurs, scarring of the fallopian tubes may lead to an ectopic pregnancy (pregnancy in the tubes).
- Premature labour may occur in some pregnant women with chlamydia.
- In rare cases men who get infection of the tubes from the testis on both sides can become sterile.
- Reiter's disease, a delayed reaction to infection (causing joint pains, eye problems and a rash).

How can chlamydia be prevented?

- Avoid risky sexual behaviour.
- Use condoms.
- Favour having a steady sexual partner.
- Limit the number of sexual partners.
- After starting any new relationship consider having a screening test.

One episode of chlamydia does not prevent your catching it again. Repeated infections with chlamydia increase the risk of infertility.

References

Harrison's On-line Chapter 179
www.netdoctor.co.uk

