



Urethritis

What is urethritis?

Urethritis is an inflammation (irritation) of the urethra, the tube that drains the bladder. Both men and women can get urethritis. Women with urethritis usually have cervicitis (inflammation of the cervix), as well.

What causes urethritis?

Urethritis is usually the result of infection with a sexually transmitted disease (STD), such as chlamydia or other similar bacteria. These infections are transmitted during unprotected vaginal, oral, or anal sex. Other causes include infection with trichomoniasis or herpes. When urethritis is caused by herpes, there are usually sores or blisters on the skin of the penis, as well.

Men who perform insertive anal sex without a condom can get normal intestinal bacteria inside the penis, and this can also cause urethritis. Other causes of urethritis include growths inside the urethra, chemical irritation, and autoimmune diseases.

What are the symptoms of urethritis?

Many people with urethritis do not have symptoms. When symptoms ARE experienced:

- A *woman* may experience burning or pain during urination. Because urethritis in women is often accompanied by inflammation of the cervix, a woman may also experience abnormal vaginal discharge; bloody spotting between menstrual periods; pain during or after vaginal sex, and spotting after sex.
- A *man* may experience a clear or white watery discharge or pus (drip) from the tip of the penis, burning or pain during urination, or an itching or stinging sensation inside the penis. If infection spreads from the urethra to the testicles, a man may experience pain and swelling in the scrotum.

If you think you've been exposed to a sexually transmitted infection (such as chlamydia or gonorrhea) that can cause urethritis, your provider can do tests to see if you're infected, whether you have symptoms or not. *(Giving your doctor a chance to find infections that don't have symptoms is one reason it's so important to get regular check-ups, even when you're not feeling sick!)*

How will I know if I have urethritis?

Your doctor or other health-care provider will collect a sample of fluid from the tip of the penis with a small swab and have it tested at a laboratory. Urethritis can also be diagnosed using a urine sample.

How is urethritis treated?

Antibiotics can cure urethritis caused by bacterial infection, often with a single dose of medicine. A person can become re-infected after treatment if exposed again.

Do sex partners have to be treated?

Yes. If you're diagnosed with urethritis, it's important to tell everyone you've had sex with over the past 2 months, so they can be examined and treated, too. Take *all* your medication as directed, even if you feel better before the medicine is finished. Don't have sex until you and the people you've had sex with have been completely treated, or you could infect each other again.

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Urethritis, *Continued*

What happens if urethritis is left untreated?

Depending on the exact cause of the urethral infection, pain and swelling of the joints or infection of the eyes can occur. In men, the infection can spread to the testicles, where inflammation and scarring can cause infertility. In women, infection of the urethra often goes along with infection of the cervix, which can spread and cause severe pain and permanent damage to the reproductive system, and also to infertility.

Like other STDs, if left untreated, urethritis can increase a person's chance of getting or spreading HIV. If you have symptoms of urethritis, get examined and treated immediately to avoid any complications.

What if I'm pregnant?

All pregnant women should be tested for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, as early as possible in pregnancy. You should be tested again during your pregnancy if you are at higher risk for getting an STD. For example, you are at higher risk if you have a new partner during pregnancy, or if you have more than one partner. If left untreated, STDs can be devastating for your baby. To protect yourself and your baby against HIV and other STDs, use a latex condom whenever you have sex.

How can I avoid urethritis?

Sexually transmitted infections can be avoided by not having sex. *If you are sexually active*, you can reduce your risk of getting the infections that cause urethritis and most other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV, by having sex only in a mutually monogamous relationship with a partner you are sure is not infected. If you are having sex outside of such a relationship, you can reduce your risk of STDs by:

- 1) *Always using a latex condom (or other type of latex barrier) whenever you have sex – vaginal, anal, or oral.* Condoms made of "natural" materials, such as lambskin, protect against pregnancy, but not against STDs. If you are allergic to latex, you can use condoms made of polyurethane or other synthetic materials.
- 2) *Limiting the number of people you have sex with.*
The more partners you have, the higher your risk.
- 3) *Avoiding alcohol and drugs when you have sex.* Drinking or getting high makes it much harder to remember to use condoms to protect yourself and others. For free, confidential help with a substance abuse problem, call 1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638), or just call 311.

More information

Free, confidential STD exams and treatment, and confidential or anonymous HIV counseling and testing, are available at Health Department clinics in all 5 boroughs of New York City. Health insurance, proof of citizenship, and parental consent are NOT required. For a list of clinics and hours, visit nyc.gov/health, or call 311.

