

Urinary tract infection

Emergency Department factsheets



What is a urinary tract infection?

Urinary tract infections (UTIs) are a group of infections of the urinary tract. The most common UTI is cystitis, which is an infection of the bladder (where urine is stored). Other UTIs involve the urethra (urethritis) or kidneys (pyelonephritis).

What causes a urinary tract infection?

The most common cause of infection is a type of bacteria that normally lives in the bowel (called *Escherichia coli* or *E.coli*). The bacteria travel up the urethra (a tube from the bladder that urine passes through) to the bladder. Once inside the bladder, these bacteria quickly grow and cause an infection.

Other causes may be related to:

- an obstruction (blockage) in the flow of urine (such as a large kidney stone or enlarged prostate gland in men)
- an indwelling urinary catheter (IDC)
- sexual intercourse, especially in women.

Women and children are more likely to get cystitis than men. Females naturally have a shorter urethra than males, which means that there is less distance for bacteria to travel to reach the bladder. Also, the urethra, vagina and back passage (anus) are very near each other, making it easy for bacteria to be spread from one to the other.

Babies in nappies commonly get UTIs. Bacteria from a dirty nappy can easily cause infection, especially in girls. This can happen to any baby and is not due to poor washing or changing.

What are the symptoms?

- Stinging or burning when passing urine.
- Passing very small amounts of urine.
- Feeling the need or 'urge' to pass urine frequently.
- Feeling that the bladder is still full after passing urine.
- Smelly, cloudy, dark or bloody urine.
- Pain low down in the abdomen or in the lower back or sides.
- Feeling unwell with nausea and fever.
- In the elderly it can cause confusion.

Treatment

A urine sample is necessary to test for infection.

Antibiotics are used to treat the infection. You should take the full course even if you are feeling better, as some bacteria may still be active.

Urinary Alkalinisers (such as Citralite, Ural Sachets or Citravescent) can help improve symptoms such as stinging. You can buy these over the counter. Please check with your doctor or pharmacist if these can be taken with any other medications you (or your child, if being treated for a UTI) may be taking.

Home care

- Make sure you completely empty your bladder fully each time you urinate.
- Women should wipe from front to back after going to the toilet.
- Get plenty of rest to give your body a chance to fight the infection.
- Drink plenty of fluids especially water to help flush the kidneys and bladder.

- If you have pain, take mild painkillers, such as paracetamol. Carefully check the label for the correct dose and make sure you are not giving you or your child any other products containing paracetamol (such as some cough medicines and cold and flu preparations).
- Place a warm pack, such as a wheat bag or hot water bottle wrapped in a towel, on your abdomen or back to help relieve pain.

What to expect

While cystitis can be very uncomfortable, it is easy to treat with antibiotics. Antibiotics act quickly and the symptoms often improve within two days. Other UTIs may need a longer course of antibiotics.

If your symptoms are not getting better, see your local doctor.

Some UTIs can become serious if left untreated, and may lead to a kidney infection which may cause permanent kidney damage.

Most adults and children with a UTI make a good recovery and have no future problems. In a very small number of children, there may be kidney problems or high blood pressure. Your doctor or health care provider will discuss the necessary tests and how to monitor for this.

It is important that any pregnant woman who has had a UTI in the past to mention this fact to their obstetrician.

Long term prevention

If you have UTI's often you can try some of the following suggestions to help prevent recurrence:

- drink plenty of fluids
- women should wipe from front to back after going to the toilet
- make sure you completely empty your bladder fully each time you urinate. Do not hold on when you need to go

- wear cotton rather than nylon underwear
- urinate after sex
- don't use perfumed soaps, talcum powder or deodorant around the genital area
- cranberry juice has been shown to help prevent UTI's. Evidence indicates it reduces the risk of the bacteria's abilities to stick to the bladder wall. Inform your doctor if you are taking cranberry supplements as they may interfere with some antibiotics.

If infections are an ongoing problem you may need to see an urologist (a doctor who specialises in urinary problems) for further treatment.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

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