Urinary tract infection (UTI) in women

This fact sheet is for people who have presented to the emergency department with this condition.

This fact sheet provides general information. If you have specific concerns, speak to your healthcare professional for further information and advice.

What is a urinary tract infection?

A urinary tract infection (UTI) is caused by an inflammation of the bladder. It is more common for women.

A UTI is usually caused by an infection in the urine which responds well to a short course of medicines called antibiotics. Occasionally it may improve without the need for antibiotics. For most people, UTIs clear quickly and without complications.

Your doctor or nurse may do a simple dipstick test on a urine sample to check for a UTI. Usually, no further test is needed.

If the infection does not improve with treatment, or improves but then returns quickly, you will be asked to do a midstream specimen of urine (MSU) test. This is then sent to the laboratory to confirm you have a UTI and to find out which germ (bacterium) is causing the infection.

Symptoms

UTIs can cause various symptoms. The main symptoms are:

- needing to pass urine urgently. The urgent feeling to pass urine can be very severe but may not disappear after having passed urine. This is called strangury.
- needing to pass urine frequently. Often only small amounts may be passed.
- burning or stinging feeling when you urinate. Women sometimes describe this as feeling like they are peeing broken glass.

Other symptoms may include:

- blood in the urine
- discomfort in your lower tummy (abdomen)
- feeling generally unwell and tired.

What causes a UTI?

- Being pregnant
- Being sexually active
- Having gone through menopause. The changes in the tissues of the vagina and urethra after menopause make it harder for them to defend against infection.
- Having diabetes mellitus
- Having a catheter in your bladder
- Having abnormalities in your kidneys, bladder or urinary system
- Having an immune system which is not working well
- Taking medication which suppresses the immune system

Some conditions cause symptoms that may be mistaken for a UTI, for example, vaginal thrush or genital herpes. Also, soaps, deodorants, bubble baths, etc., may irritate your genital area and cause mild pain when you pass urine.

Treatment

Paracetamol or ibuprofen can ease pain or discomfort.

Antibiotics

Antibiotic medication is a common treatment for most women, including those that are not pregnant. Symptoms usually improve within a day or so after starting treatment.

If your symptoms are mild, you may be offered a delayed prescription for antibiotics. This means you only pick up the prescription if your symptoms worsen, or do not improve, over the following few days.

No treatment

Not taking any treatment may be an option if symptoms are very mild (and if you are not pregnant or if you have no other illnesses). Your immune system can often clear the infection.

Without antibiotics, UTIs (particularly mild cases) may go away on its own in a few days. However, symptoms can sometimes last for a week or so if you do not take antibiotics.

Home care

Drink plenty of water.

Simple steps that may help to prevent UTIs include:

- wiping your bottom from front to back after going to the toilet
- changing incontinence pads regularly
- passing urine after sex
- making sure you drink plenty of water.

What to expect

See your doctor if:

- your symptoms worsen
- you develop a fever
- you develop pain in your loin, in case the infection has spread to your kidneys, causing a kidney infection
- your symptoms do not improve by the end of taking the course of antibiotics
- your symptoms come back within two weeks of the antibiotics finishing.

Please seek urgent medical advice to assess your condition if you feel more unwell, develop back pain, fevers or vomiting to assess your condition.

If you develop UTIs often, you should see your doctor.