

Chlamydia - the basics

Chlamydia is a curable sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a bacterium (a kind of germ) called *Chlamydia trachomatis*. Chlamydia can infect the urethra (water passage), the uterus (womb), the cervix (neck of womb), the ovarian (Fallopian) tubes, testicles, rectum (back passage), throat and sometimes the eyes.

Most men and women infected with chlamydia will not notice anything wrong. Prompt treatment is recommended to prevent more serious problems:

- *In women:* the spread of infection to the womb and ovarian (Fallopian) tubes can lead to infertility
- *In men:* the spread of infection to the testicles leading to pain and swelling

Testing is available at all specialised sexual health or genitourinary medicine clinics, many family planning clinics and some family doctor (GP) services. Some chemists (pharmacies) offer testing. In some areas, self-testing kits can be ordered on-line. If you have chlamydia we recommend that you should have tests for other STI including gonorrhoea, syphilis and HIV.

How common is chlamydia?

Chlamydia is the commonest bacterial STI in the UK. In 2014, over 206,000 cases of chlamydia were diagnosed in England alone. It is found most frequently in people under the age of 25 years.

How do you catch chlamydia?

Chlamydia is passed on:

- through unprotected vaginal, oral or anal sex (or sharing sex toys) with someone who has chlamydia
- from an infected mother to her baby during normal childbirth (vaginal delivery)
- sometimes from genitals to fingers to eyes where it may cause an eye infection (conjunctivitis)

Chlamydia cannot be caught by kissing, hugging, sharing baths or towels, using swimming pools or from toilet seats.

What would I notice if I had chlamydia?

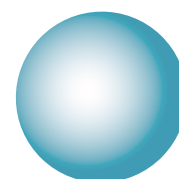
Women may not notice anything wrong. Some women may notice one or more of the following:

- bleeding between periods or after sex
- pain in the lower abdomen, particularly during sex
- burning pain when passing urine
- a change in the colour or amount of vaginal discharge



Men may not notice anything wrong. Some men may notice one or more of the following:

- a discharge from the tip of the penis
- a burning pain when passing urine



How do I get tested for chlamydia?

Women

If you have symptoms a swab will be taken by a doctor or nurse during an internal vaginal examination. If you do not have symptoms no internal examination is needed and a swab is taken from inside the vagina. This swab can be taken by the doctor, by a nurse or by you if you prefer. If you have had anal sex or given your partner oral sex, you may be advised to have swabs taken from the rectum (back passage) and/or throat.

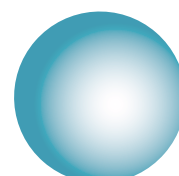
Men

If you have a discharge from the penis a doctor or nurse will take a swab from the tip of your penis and you will be asked to give a urine sample. Men who have sex with men may be advised to have swabs taken from the rectum (back passage) and/or throat.

The result of your chlamydia test is not usually available on the day you visit the clinic. You will be told how you will get your results before you leave the clinic.

How soon can I have a chlamydia test?

We advise patients to have a test for chlamydia at their first visit to a sexual health clinic. However, if you are very worried that you may have caught chlamydia more recently than two weeks before your test, you could consider repeating your chlamydia test two weeks after this risk happened.



How is chlamydia treated?

Chlamydia can be easily treated with antibiotics. All treatments from sexual health clinics are free and are given to you in the clinic.

Important information about your treatment

The antibiotics are highly effective if taken correctly. The antibiotics don't stop your contraception working.

What about my partner?

As chlamydia is sexually transmitted, it is important that your partner is tested for this as well as other STIs. This is known as partner notification. If you wish and with your permission, the clinic can contact your partner for you without mentioning your name. Some of your previous partners may also need testing – you will be advised about this.

When can I have sex again?

You should not have sex (this includes oral sex and sex with condoms) until one week after both you and your partner have finished your treatment.

What happens if chlamydia is left untreated?

Women:

Chlamydia may spread internally from the cervix (neck of the womb) to the uterus (womb) and then up to the ovarian tubes and ovaries. This is called pelvic inflammatory disease or PID. PID can lead to scarring of the ovarian tubes, increasing the risk of infertility and/or ectopic pregnancy (a pregnancy that occurs outside the womb, usually in one of the ovarian tubes).

Men:

Chlamydia can spread from the urethra (water passage) to the testicles causing a painful condition known as epididymo-orchitis (see the BASHH leaflet 'Epididymo-orchitis').

Women and men:

In rare cases chlamydia may cause pain and swelling in joints such as the ankles or knees. This is known as sexually acquired reactive arthropathy (SARA) and is more common in men. Sometimes inflammation of the eyes (conjunctivitis) also occurs.

Can I catch chlamydia again?

Yes you can.

To prevent this make sure your partner has been treated and wait for one week the before having sex with him/her again.

Protect yourself with new partners by using a condom for all vaginal, anal and oral sex.

Or

Ensure that both you and a new partner have a sexual health screen before any unprotected sex (sex without a condom).

You may be advised to repeat a chlamydia test 3–6 months after you have been treated. This is because it is common for some people to catch chlamydia again.

Chlamydia in pregnancy

Chlamydia can be caught by pregnant women and it is important that it is treated to prevent the baby catching chlamydia during childbirth.

In newborn babies, chlamydia may cause infection of the eyes (conjunctivitis) or lungs (pneumonia). Treatment of the pregnant woman will make sure that the baby does not catch the infection. Your doctor or nurse will discuss things in more detail with you.

This leaflet was produced by the Clinical Effectiveness Group of the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH). Its contents are based on the BASHH UK national guideline for the management of genital infection with Chlamydia trachomatis 2015.

More information:

BASHH: www.bashh.org/guidelines

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk

National chlamydia screening programme:
www.chlamydiaSCREENING.nhs.uk



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