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Chlamydia- Questions & Answers

What is Chlamydia?

Chlamydia is a common and curable infection caused by the bacteria *Chlamydia trachomatis*. The bacteria target the cells of the mucous membranes, which are the soft, moist tissues of the body not covered by skin. Examples of areas that could be infected with this bacteria include:

- the surfaces of the urethra, vagina, cervix and uterus
- the fallopian tubes
- the anus and rectum
- the lining of the eyelid
- and less commonly, the throat

How common is it?

In the United States, chlamydia is the most common bacterial sexually transmitted infection (STI), particularly among sexually active adolescents and young adults. In 2002, there were 834,555 cases of chlamydia reported to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). However, it is estimated that almost **3 million cases actually occurred** and as many as one in 10 adolescent females test positive for chlamydia.

Symptoms

It is important to understand that focusing on signs and symptoms is not very useful in determining if someone is infected with chlamydia. Approximately, 75% of women and 50% of men do not experience symptoms. So, most people who are infected with this bacteria will not be able to tell it from symptoms. If a person does have symptoms, they usually develop within 1 - 3 weeks after exposure to chlamydia. How long a person remains infectious (able to transmit the bacteria to others) is difficult to determine since so many people are asymptomatic. A person must be considered infectious from the time they become infected until treatment is completed.

Women

Most women do not experience any symptoms, but if symptoms are present they may be minor, such as:

- Vaginal discharge, or burning sensation during urination.
- If the infection spreads to the fallopian tubes, women may experience:
- Lower abdominal and lower back pain, pain during intercourse, bleeding between menstrual periods, or nausea or fever.

Men may be asymptomatic or have minor symptoms that may include one or more of the following:

- Pus (thick yellow-white fluid) or watery or milky discharge from the penis
- Pain or burning during urination
- Pain or swelling of the testicle

Both men and women can experience proctitis (inflamed rectum), urethritis (inflamed urethra) and conjunctivitis (inflamed eyelid). The most common complications in newborns include conjunctivitis (pink eye) and pneumonia.

How is it transmitted?

Chlamydia, like other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), is passed from an infected person to a partner through certain sexual activities.

- Chlamydia is passed primarily during anal or vaginal sex. It is less likely to be transmitted through oral sex.
 - It can be passed when the mucous membrane, the soft skin covering all the openings of the body, comes into contact with the mucous membrane secretions or semen of an infected person. This is what happens during unprotected sex (that is sex without a condom) whether vaginal or anal sex.
- Oral sex is not a common cause of infection with this bacteria.
 - Eye infections may result when discharge carries the disease into the eye during sex or hand-to-eye contact.
- Chlamydia is **not passed** through things like shaking hands or toilet seats.
- It can also be passed from mother to newborn as the baby passes through the infected birth canal.
 - This can result in eye infections, pneumonia or other complications.
- In children, chlamydia may be a possible sign of sexual abuse.

What does it mean for my health?

If untreated, chlamydia can cause complications in men, women and infants.

Untreated chlamydia infections in **women** may lead to:

- Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID), a serious infection of a woman's reproductive organs, that left untreated, can cause infertility.
- Cystitis (inflammation of the urinary bladder)
- A condition called mucopurulent cervicitis, characterized by a yellow discharge from the cervix

Untreated chlamydia in **men** may lead to:

- Prostatitis (inflammation of the prostate gland)
- Scarring of the urethra
- Infertility
- Epididymitis

Testing/Diagnosis

There are several different reliable tests for chlamydia. Common tests are either a urine sample or a simple swab from the cervix. Other tests, such as for Gonorrhoea, may be performed at the same time.

Treatment

There are antibiotic treatments (azithromycin and doxycycline) that are effective in treating chlamydia. Your health care provider will help you decide what is best for you. Whatever treatment prescribed, there are some important points to know: The patient must take all medications as directed.

- All partners should be examined and treated.
- The infected person should not have sex until he or she and any partner or partners have been treated and cured.
- Persons who show symptoms after treatment should be tested again by culture.

Talk to your partner

Telling a partner can be hard, but keep in mind that most people with chlamydia do not know they have it. It is important that you talk to your partner as soon as possible so she or he can get treatment. Also, it is possible to pass chlamydia back and forth, so if you get treated and your partner does not, you may become infected again.

Reduce your risk

As with other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) there are things you can do to reduce or eliminate the risk of chlamydia.

Practice the ABC's of safer sex:

Abstinence:

(not having sexual contact) is a sure way to avoid infection.

Be:

Faithful to one partner. Mutual monogamy (having sex with only one uninfected partner) is another way to avoid infection.

Condom-wise:

Using condoms consistently and correctly for vaginal and anal sex can reduce risk of transmission.