

Urethritis

What is urethritis?

Urethritis is an inflammation of the urethra. The urethra is the tube that carries urine from the bladder to the outside of the body. In a penis, the urethra also carries semen.

What causes urethritis?

Urethritis is often caused by sexually transmitted infections (STIs) like gonorrhea, chlamydia or herpes simplex virus. These cases are seen more in young, sexually active men. Other organisms that are not sexually transmitted can infect the urethra. For example the normal bacteria that grow in the genital area can infect the urethra. Sometimes infections of the bladder or prostate, or recent procedures that may involve the urethra can cause urethritis. For more information about gonorrhea and chlamydia, see [HealthLinkBC File #08a Gonorrhea](#) and [HealthLinkBC File #08l Chlamydia](#).

To find out if you have urethritis, you should be examined by a health care provider and have lab tests done.

Sexual abuse must be considered if there are symptoms of unexplained or repeated infections in children.

How is it spread?

The sexually transmitted organisms that cause urethritis spread through unprotected oral, vaginal or anal sex.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of urethritis can include:

- Clear or mucous-like fluid from the penis or vagina
- People with urethritis can have redness or swelling at the tip of the penis
- Pain or burning feeling when urinating

- Itching or irritation in the urethra – the tube that urine passes through

Other than the usual symptoms of urethritis, adults or children may also experience:

- Abdominal pain
- Unwillingness to urinate
- Loss of bladder control

It is also possible to have urethritis and not have any symptoms.

What are the potential complications?

If the bacteria that caused urethritis are not treated, they can lead to pain and swelling in one or both testicles and may cause infertility.

What is the treatment?

Urethritis that is caused by bacteria may be treated with antibiotic pills. For effective treatment, carefully follow the treatment instructions and, if you were given pills, finish them all. If the infection was sexually transmitted, sexual partners should be tested and treated. It takes time for the infection to clear from the body, so it is important that you do not have any oral, vaginal or anal sex for 7 days after you and your partner(s) start the antibiotic treatment.

If you or your partner(s) do not finish the treatment, miss pills or have unprotected sex before you have finished all of the medication, the infection could stay in your body or may be passed back to you or your partner(s). It could cause health problems later. If this happens, talk with your health care provider who will help you to decide if you or your partners need more treatment. Your health care provider may offer other treatments if another cause is identified.

How can I reduce my chance of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI)?

Practice safer sex by using a condom

When used correctly, external (“male”) and internal (“female”) condoms help prevent the spread of many STIs during vaginal, anal and oral sex. Condoms are less effective at protecting against STIs transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, such as herpes simplex virus, genital warts (human papillomavirus (HPV)) and syphilis (when sores are present).

Important things to remember when using condoms:

- Check the condom package for damage. Do not use a damaged condom
- Check the expiry date. Do not use a condom after its expiry date
- Carefully open the package so that the condom does not tear. Do not use a torn condom
- Keep condoms away from sharp objects such as rings, studs or piercings
- Store condoms at room temperature
- Use a new condom every time you have sex. Do not reuse condoms
- Do not use 2 condoms at once. Using 2 condoms together may result in a condom breaking
- Use only water-based lubricants with external (“male”) latex condoms. Oil-based lubricants, such as petroleum jelly, lotion or baby oil, can weaken and destroy latex
- Water or oil-based lubricant may be used with polyurethane/nitrile condoms
- Use only condoms made of latex or polyurethane/nitrile/polyisoprene rubbers. Latex and polyurethane condoms are the best types of condoms to use to help prevent pregnancy and STIs. (Lambskin and sheepskin condoms can help prevent pregnancy but don’t work as well as latex or polyurethane condoms to prevent STIs)

- Avoid using condoms with spermicides containing nonoxynol-9 (N-9). It can irritate tissue and may increase the chance of getting an STI

Get vaccinated

Vaccines can prevent some STIs, such as hepatitis A, B and human papillomavirus (HPV). Talk to your health care provider about how to get these vaccinations.

Know your sexual health status

If you have recently changed sexual partners, or have multiple sex partners, getting regular tests for STIs will tell you if you have an infection. Some people can have an STI and not have any symptoms. Finding and treating an STI reduces the chances of passing infections on to your partner(s).

The more partners you have, the higher your chances of getting exposed to STIs.

Talk about prevention

Talk to your partner(s) about STIs and how you would like to prevent them before having sex. If you are having trouble discussing safer sex with your partner(s), talk about it with your health care provider or a counsellor.

For tips on how to talk to your partner(s), visit the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) Smart Sex Resource <https://smartsexresource.com/sex-talk/talk-about-it>.

Informing partners

If you have a sexually transmitted infection and are sexually active, it is important to tell your sexual partner(s). This will enable them to make decisions about their health and getting tested.

For more information

For more information on how you can reduce your chance of getting an STI, see [HealthLinkBC File #080 Preventing sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#).



BC Centre for Disease Control
Provincial Health Services Authority

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