

# chlamydia

Chlamydia is a sexually transmitted infection. There are over 60,000 cases of chlamydia a year in the UK, and in recent years the number of people infected has risen. If left untreated, the infection can cause infertility in women, and increase the likelihood of passing on HIV. Although anybody who is sexually active can get chlamydia, some groups, most notably young women or gay men, are more likely to be infected.

## Transmission

Chlamydia is caused by bacteria called *Chlamydia trachomatis*. It can be transmitted during anal, oral and vaginal sex if no condom is used, and can affect the anus, penis, cervix, throat and eyes.

Untreated chlamydia may make a person with HIV more infectious as chlamydia can cause breaks in the mucous membranes (the barriers) of affected areas, and increases the number of HIV-infected cells in those areas. Having chlamydia can also make it more likely that an HIV-negative person will be infected with HIV if they are exposed to the virus.

Chlamydia can also be passed on from mother to child during child birth and can affect the baby's eyes, and cause pneumonia.

## Prevention

Using a condom for anal, oral or vaginal sex is an effective way of avoiding infection with chlamydia or passing the infection on to somebody else. People who are sexually active are advised to have regular sexual health check-ups, where they will be tested for chlamydia and other sexually transmitted infections. Most HIV treatment centres have an associated sexual health clinic, where confidential and free treatment can be obtained without referral from your GP or HIV doctor.

## Symptoms

Symptoms of chlamydia normally occur one to three weeks after infection. However, many people who have chlamydia are unaware that they have the infection. It is thought that as many as 75 per cent of women with chlamydia, and 50 per cent of men with chlamydia have no symptoms.

Where symptoms do occur, in men it usually consists of a milky discharge from the penis, particularly in the morning, and a burning sensation when urinating. Chlamydia can also cause the testicles to swell. If a person has been infected anally, there may be soreness around the anus and a discharge.

Women with chlamydia may notice a milky discharge from the vagina and/or lower abdominal or back pain, or pain when having

sex. There may also be vaginal bleeding during sex and bleeding between periods.

If chlamydia is left untreated it can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) in women, which can cause ectopic pregnancy, infertility, and even death in extreme cases. Men are less likely to develop serious complications, though untreated chlamydia may cause infertility. Both men and women may develop arthritis as a consequence of untreated chlamydia.

## Diagnosis

A general sexual health check-up at a genitourinary medicine (GUM) or sexually transmitted diseases clinic will include a test for chlamydia. GUM clinics offer free, confidential and open access treatment. Some HIV clinics also offer sexual health screening. Chlamydia is diagnosed by taking a swab from the penis or cervix. The swabs can be a little uncomfortable but are very quick to take. Some clinics also examine a urine sample for evidence of infection with chlamydia.

Chlamydia is often the cause of non-specific urethritis (NSU), the symptoms of which are very similar, and which is diagnosed and treated in the same way. It can, however, take up to a week for tests to show if chlamydia is present and it is important to contact your clinic for the result of your test so treatment can be given if the infection has been detected.

## Treatment

Chlamydia is treated with antibiotics. Normally this consists of a seven day course of doxycycline, or a single dose of azithromycin. It is important to take all your tablets to ensure that the infection is eradicated from your body. Symptoms may persist for a few days after taking azithromycin as the antibiotic takes time to work.

When chlamydia is diagnosed you may be given the opportunity to see a Health Adviser. Health Advisers can give you information about safer sex and how to protect your own and other people's sexual health. They may also ask you to help them, where possible or practicable, to contact your sexual partners so they can be tested and treated too. In turn, this is intended to prevent you from becoming re-infected through continuing to have sex with someone who is themselves infected.

**please photocopy and pass on**

copyright © NAM 2006  
all rights reserved

**NAM publishes a wide range of publications on treatment for HIV**

**for details write to NAM**  
Freepost LON 17995  
London SW9 6BR

**tel**  
+44 (0) 20 7840 0050  
**web**  
www.aidsmap.com