



COMMON URINARY TRACT INFECTIONS

Urinary tract infections (UTIs) are one of the most common health problems for women.

If you drive for long periods and/or limit the amount of water you drink (because it's difficult to take loo breaks as often as you want or should do), you may be at risk. So what are UTIs? How can you reduce your chances of developing one? And what can you do to avoid getting a UTI in the first place?

A BIT OF BACKGROUND

In women, the urinary tract is made up of a number of organs – two kidneys, two ureters (the tubes that connect each of the kidneys to the bladder), the bladder (a stretchy sac where urine is stored before leaving the body) and a urethra (the tube that connects the bladder to the outside of the body).

UTI symptoms can include a burning sensation when urinating and the urge to urinate more often. You might also feel that you can't empty your bladder completely.

A UTI occurs when there is infection in the urethra. So, infection of the urethra and bladder is called cystitis and is classed as a lower UTI. An upper UTI results when infection has travelled further up the urinary tract towards the kidneys; infection of the kidneys or ureters is classified as an upper UTI.

YOUR HARDWORKING BODY

Your body works hard to keep infection under control inside your body. So, urine (which is waste products diluted in water) is stored in the bladder before you expel it. It is normally sterile i.e. it does not contain bacteria or viruses. But other parts of your body aren't sterile – the outside of your body is covered with many types of bacteria, viruses and fungi – most of which are harmless. Plus, there are trillions of microorganisms living inside your body – these are called probiotics and are vital for life. Other bacteria live in and on you but don't normally cause harm – unless they travel to another part of your body. One of these is the bacteria,

centimetres long in women (around 4cm) so bacteria only have to travel a short distance from outside the body to the inside of the bladder.

UTI SYMPTOMS

These vary and you may only have some symptoms, which can include a burning sensation when urinating and/or the urge to urinate more often. You might also feel that you can't empty your bladder completely. Urine may be foul smelling or cloudy and blood may be present. If left untreated, the infection may travel from the bladder up the ureters to the kidneys and cause a more serious infection – this will need prompt medical attention.

If infection has travelled upwards, you may experience a high temperature of 38°C or above and also feel:

- Pain in your lower back and sides
- Shivering and chills
- Nausea and vomiting
- Confusion and agitation or restlessness.

Upper UTIs can be serious – without treatment, the kidneys can become damaged and/or the infection may pass into the bloodstreamⁱⁱ.

Escherichia coli (E. coli). This lives in the gut but if it spreads from the anus to the urethra, infection can result.

WHO'S SUSCEPTIBLE?

Anyone can get a UTI but women are especially susceptibleⁱ. This is because the urethra is only a few

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If you experience any of these symptoms go and see your GP. This is especially important if:

- You feel the symptoms are getting worse or they don't improve after a few days
- UTIs keep coming back.

If you think you have a UTI, your GP can give you a simple urine test and prescribe the right sort of antibiotics to treat the infection.

As with all kinds of antibiotic treatment, it is vital to complete the course to make sure that the

UTIs recurring:

1. The two most effective things you can do are drink lots of water and avoid going for long intervals between loo visits. Water helps to flush out your bladder. Remember, urine should be straw coloured – if it's darker, you need to drink a little more.
2. If you can, set an alarm and try to empty your bladder at least every four hours during the day – even if you don't feel like you need to. Don't try to hold it until you find a more convenient time,

6. Wear cotton underwear – natural fibres allow for more air flow.
7. Remember that your age and stage of life can affect the prevalence of UTIs. The levels of the female hormone, oestrogen, dip during menopause and some women experience vaginal and bladder symptoms^v. These can usually be improved with treatment including the use of hormone therapy, hormone creams, pessaries and gels. Your GP can advise you on what's right for you.

If you're following these tips already and still getting recurrent UTIs, speak with your GP who may suggest taking a long-term course of antibiotics. Your doctor may even suggest you keep a course or two of antibiotics that you can use as soon as you feel the symptoms of a UTI. Your GP can find the right treatment for you.

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infection is kept under control.

Symptoms should ease within a few daysⁱⁱⁱ but if you're not feeling better or you are worried in any way, go back to see your GP.

WHAT CAN TRIGGER INFECTION?

You may be at greater risk of developing a UTI if you^{iv}:

- Are having difficulty emptying your bladder
- Have a condition that causes your urinary tract to be obstructed in some way – such as kidney stones
- Use a contraceptive diaphragm or condoms coated in spermicide
- Have diabetes
- Have a compromised immune system.

WAYS TO PREVENT UTIs

There are a few things that you can do to try and reduce the chances of

space or place. And when you do empty your bladder, make a conscious effort to empty it fully. If you're driving for long periods and find it difficult to get to the loo, you may want to consider a product that helps you urinate discreetly in the privacy of your vehicle. For more information about this, speak to a pharmacist or ask your GP for advice.

3. Wipe yourself from front to back after using the toilet – this helps to prevent bacteria from the anus entering the urethra.
4. Empty your bladder soon after having sex to flush away any bacteria that might have entered your urethra.
5. Wear loose-fitting clothing – not tight jeans or trousers. The kind of bacteria that cause UTIs like dark, moist places that lack oxygen.

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[^]30-day cooling off period refund applies only when you have not made a claim.

ⁱBetter Health Channel. Urinary tract infections (UTI). <http://bit.ly/2bzcdch>. ⁱⁱMayo Clinic. Kidney infection. <http://mayoclinic.in/1DP3MmN>.
ⁱⁱⁱWebMD. Antibiotics for Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs). <http://web.md/2b8PohS>. ^{iv}Mayo Clinic. Urinary tract infection (UTI) Risk factors. <http://mayoclinic.in/1s8lvi>. ^vMayo Clinic. Urinary tract infection (UTI) Risk factors. <http://mayoclinic.in/1s8lvi>.

