

Patient information factsheet

Urinary tract infections (UTIs)

Urinary tract infections (UTIs) are very common. They can be painful and uncomfortable, but they usually pass within a few days or can be easily treated with a course of antibiotics.

UTIs are more common in women than in men. It's estimated half of all women in the UK will have a UTI at least once in their life, and 1 in 2,000 healthy men will develop one each year. If you develop a UTI, you're likely to feel:

- pain or a burning sensation when urinating (doctors refer to this as dysuria)
- a need to urinate often
- pain in the lower abdomen (tummy)

Symptoms of urinary tract infections

The symptoms of an infection in your upper urinary tract (kidney and ureters) are different from symptoms of infection in your lower urinary tract (bladder and urethra). However, in some cases you may notice the symptoms of both, as one can spread to the other. Symptoms of a UTI are similar to those of many other conditions and don't necessarily mean you have an infection.

Symptoms of a lower UTI can include:

- urethral syndrome – this includes needing to urinate more often, a constant, dull pain in the pubic region, and pain when urinating (dysuria)
- cloudy urine or blood in your urine (haematuria)
- urine that smells unusually unpleasant
- back pain
- a general sense of feeling unwell

Symptoms of an upper UTI can include:

- a high temperature (fever) of 38C (100.4F) or above
- uncontrollable shivering
- nausea (feeling sick)
- vomiting
- diarrhoea

With an upper UTI you may also notice pain in your side, back or groin. The pain can range from moderate to severe, and it is often worse when you're urinating.

Causes of a urinary tract infections

Most urinary tract infections (UTIs) are caused by bacteria that live in the digestive system. If these bacteria get into the urethra (the tube where urine comes out), they can cause infection. It's thought the bacteria can spread to the urethra via the anus. For example, if toilet paper touches your anus and then touches your genitals, the bacteria can multiply and move through your urinary tract, causing infection of your:

- urethra (urethritis)
- bladder (cystitis)
- ureters (ureteritis) – the ureters are tubes that run from the bladder to the kidneys
- kidneys (pyelonephritis)

Who's at risk of getting a UTI?

Women are more likely than men to have a UTI. This is because in women, the urethra is closer to the anus than it is in men. Also, the urethra is much shorter in women, making it easier for bacteria to reach the bladder.

You are also more likely to develop a UTI if you have:

- a condition that obstructs or blocks your urinary tract, such as kidney stones
- a condition that prevents you fully emptying your bladder (it's easier for bacteria to multiply if urine stays in the bladder for too long)
- a weakened immune system – from chemotherapy or HIV, for example
- a urinary catheter – a tube inserted into your bladder to drain away the urine

Recurring UTIs

Unfortunately, some people keep getting UTIs. This is called having recurring UTIs.

Recurring UTIs can happen because the urethra gets irritated after having sex. If it's thought this might be the cause of your recurring UTIs, you may be given antibiotic tablets to take after each time you have sex. Using a diaphragm for contraception or using condoms coated with spermicide can increase the risk of getting a UTI. If your recurring UTIs are not thought to be linked to having sex, you may be given a low-dose antibiotic to take every day.

Treating a UTI

Your treatment will depend on whether your infection is in the upper or lower urinary tract. Both types of urinary tract (UTI) infection can usually be treated at home using a course of antibiotics.

If an upper UTI is more serious or you are also at increased risk of complications, you'll need hospital treatment. You can also use over-the-counter painkillers such as paracetamol to help with any pain.

However, if you have an upper UTI, don't use non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen. These types of drugs can increase the risk of you developing kidney complications. Make sure you drink plenty of fluids, as this will help to relieve any symptoms of fever and prevent dehydration.

Other useful advice

The following advice may be useful in helping you keep your bladder and urethra free from bacteria:

- drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration and help clear bacteria from the urinary tract
- go to the toilet as soon as you feel the need to urinate, rather than holding it in
- wipe from front to back after going to the toilet
- practise good hygiene by washing your genitals every day, and before having sex
- empty your bladder after having sex

Who to contact if you are concerned

If you have any concerns about your symptoms you should contact your GP or call 111 for advice.

Useful links

NHS Choices www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Urinary-tract-infection-adults/Pages/Introduction.aspx

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Have your say

We would be very grateful if you would complete a feedback card before you leave. It's your chance to have your say on the treatment you, or a family member received in hospital. Feedback helps us continually improve the service we give to our patients.

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The information in this factsheet has been adapted from NHS Choices www.nhs.uk

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