

Urinary Tract Infections

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Your Guide to [Women's Health](#).

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Causes - Symptoms - Treatments

The urinary tract is the body's filtering system for removal of liquid wastes. Women are especially susceptible to bacteria which may invade the urinary tract and multiply resulting in infection.

Although most urinary tract infections or UTIs are not serious, they are painful. Approximately fifty percent of all women will have at least one UTI in her lifetime with many women having several infections throughout their lifetime. Fortunately, these infections are easily treated with antibiotics that cause the symptoms to quickly disappear. Some women seem more prone to repeated infections than others and for them it can be a frustrating battle.

What Causes Urinary Tract Infections?

The most common cause of UTI are bacteria from the bowel that live on the skin near the rectum or in the vagina which can spread and enter the urinary tract through the urethra.

Once these bacteria enter the urethra they travel upwards causing infection in the bladder and sometimes other parts of the urinary tract.

Sexual intercourse is a common cause of urinary tract infections because the female anatomy can make women more prone to urinary tract infections. During sexual intercourse bacteria in the vaginal area is sometimes massaged into the urethra by the motion of the penis.

Women who change sexual partners or begin having sexual intercourse more frequently may experience bladder or urinary tract infections more often than women in monogamous relationships. Although it is rare, some women get a urinary tract infection every time they have sex.

Another cause of bladder infections or UTI is waiting too long to urinate. The bladder is a muscle that stretches to hold urine and contracts when the urine is released. Waiting very long past the time you first feel the need to urinate causes the bladder to stretch beyond its capacity which over time can weaken the bladder muscle. When the bladder is weakened it may not empty completely and some urine is left in the bladder which may increase the risk of urinary tract infection or bladder infection.

Other factors may also increase a woman's risk of developing UTI including [pregnancy](#), having urinary tract infections or bladder infections as a child, having past [menopause](#), and [diabetes](#).

What are the Symptoms of Urinary Tract Infections?

Symptoms of UTI or bladder infection are not easy to miss and include a strong [urge to urinate that cannot be delayed](#) which is followed by a sharp pain or burning sensation in the urethra when the urine is released. Most often very little urine is released and the urine that is released may be tinged with blood. The urge to urinate recurs quickly and soreness may occur in the lower abdomen, back, or sides.

This cycle may repeat itself frequently during the day or night--most people urinate about six times a day, when the need to urinate occurs more often a bladder infection should be suspected.

When bacteria enters the ureters and spread to the kidneys, symptoms such as back pain, chills, fever, nausea, and vomiting may occur, as well as the previous symptoms of lower urinary tract infection.

Proper diagnosis is vital since these symptoms can also be caused by other problems such as infections of the vagina or [vulva](#). Only your physician can make the distinction and make a correct diagnosis.

How is Diagnosis of UTI Made?

The number of bacteria and white blood cells in a [urine sample](#) is the basis for diagnosing urinary tract infections. Urine is examined under a microscope and cultured in a substance that promotes the growth of bacteria. A pelvic exam may also be necessary.

What You Need to Know About UTI Treatments and Prevention

What is the Treatment for Urinary Tract Infections?

Antibiotics are the usual treatment for bladder infections and other urinary tract infections. Seven to ten days of antibiotics is usually required although some infections may require only a single dose of antibiotics.

It's important that all antibiotics are taken as prescribed. Antibiotics should not be discontinued before the full course of antibiotic treatment is complete. Symptoms may disappear soon after beginning antibiotic treatment. However, if antibiotics are quit early the infection may still be present and recur.

Another urine test may be ordered about a week after completing treatment to be sure the infection is cured.

Tips for Preventing Urinary Tract Infections

- The most important tip to prevent urinary tract infections, bladder infections, and kidney infections is to practice good personal hygiene.
 - Always wipe from front to back after a bowel movement or urination, and wash the skin around and between the rectum and vagina daily. Washing before and after sexual intercourse may also decrease a woman's risk of UTI.
- Drinking plenty of fluids (water) each day will help flush bacterium out of the urinary system and emptying the bladder as soon as the urge to urinate occurs may also help to decrease the risk of bladder infection or UTI. Some physicians recommend urinating before and after sex as well as a mean of flushing out any bacteria that may enter the urethra during sexual intercourse.
- [Vitamin C](#) makes the urine acidic and helps to reduce the number of potentially harmful bacteria in the urinary tract system.
- Wear only panties with a cotton crotch--cotton allows moisture to escape whereas other materials may trap moisture and create a potential breeding ground for bacteria.
- Cranberry juice often helps to reduce frequency of bladder infections. Cranberry supplements are available over-the-counter and many women find they work amazingly quickly when an UTI has occurred, however, a physician's diagnosis is still necessary even if cranberry juice or [herbals](#) reduce pain or symptoms.
- If you experience frequent urinary tract infections changing sexual positions that cause less friction on the urethra may help. Some physicians prescribe an antibiotic to be taken immediately following sex for women who tend to have frequent UTIs.

Things to Remember...

Although urinary tract infections are common and distinctly painful they are usually easy to treat once properly diagnosed and only last a few days. When treated promptly and properly urinary tract infections are rarely serious.