

The silent disease

Frequent screening for chlamydia recommended for all sexually active adolescent females

Most people who have chlamydia don't realize that they have it. This sexually transmitted disease (STD) generally causes no symptoms or symptoms so mild that many who have the infection don't even realize it until they develop a serious complication.

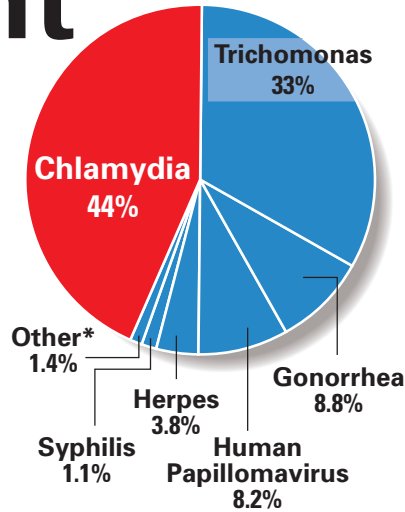
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than 4 million new cases of chlamydia occur in the United States each year. However, as many as 75% of women and 50% of men who have chlamydia may not know that they have the disease and do not seek health treatment.

An article in this issue of *JAMA* (page 521) suggests that all sexually active girls and young women between the ages of 12 and 19 years be tested for chlamydial infection every 6 months. About a third of the sexually active girls and young women had at least 1 positive test result for chlamydia.

Testing for chlamydia is done on a urine specimen or a specimen obtained during a pelvic examination.

There are more than 20 STDs. Besides chlamydia, which is the most common STD, others include **trichomonas**, **gonorrhea**, **human papillomavirus (HPV)**, **genital herpes**, **syphilis**, and **human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)**.

Additional Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for HIV, STD & TB Prevention, AMA's Complete Guide to Women's Health, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases



Estimated annual incidence for each STD given in the Institute of Medicine's report, *The Hidden Epidemic*.

* Other includes Hepatitis B, HIV, Chancroid

COMPLICATIONS:

If not treated in women, chlamydia can lead to a number of more serious conditions:

- **Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)** – A serious infection of the reproductive organs. Affects up to 1 million women in the United States, and half of all cases may be due to chlamydial infection.
- **Infertility** – PID can scar the fallopian tubes, blocking the tubes and prevent fertilization from taking place. An estimated 100,000 women each year become infertile as a result of PID.
- **Tubal pregnancy** – The scarring could also interfere with the passage of the fertilized egg down into the uterus, which can result in the egg implanting in the fallopian tube. This **ectopic** or tubal pregnancy can be fatal to the mother and results in the loss of the fetus.
- **Premature birth** from breaking of the amniotic sac.
- **Infection of the infant** during birth causing life-threatening pneumonia or eye infection.

If not treated in men, chlamydia can lead to:

- **Swollen or tender testicles** – A possible symptom of **epididymitis**, an inflammation of part of the male reproductive system. It can cause infertility if left untreated.
- **Urethritis** – Infection inside the penis that can cause pain and difficulty urinating.

WHAT IS CHLAMYDIA?

Chlamydial infection, caused by the bacterium **Chlamydia trachomatis**, is the most common sexually transmitted disease (STD) in the United States. It can be transmitted during vaginal, oral, or anal sexual contact with an infected partner. Most chlamydial infections cause no symptoms. However, some men and women may experience abnormal genital discharge or pain during urination after contracting the disease.

TREATMENT:

A number of different antibiotics can be prescribed by your doctor to treat chlamydia. Penicillin, which is sometimes used to treat other STDs, is not effective against chlamydial infections. As with all antibiotics, people with chlamydial infections should take all the prescribed medications until they are used up, even after the symptoms have disappeared. If the symptoms do not disappear within 1 to 2 weeks after finishing the medicine, consult your doctor again.

PREVENTION:

All people who have more than one sexual partner, and especially women younger than 25 years, should be tested for chlamydial infection regularly. Ways to prevent getting the disease are to refrain from having sex or use condoms during sex.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- CDC National STD Hotline
800/227-8922
- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
Send postcard to:
Chlamydial Infection
NIAID, Office of Communications
31 Center Drive, MSC 2520
Building 31, Room 7A50
Bethesda, MD 20892-2520 or
www.niaid.nih.gov

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