

# Urinary Tract Infections

A common problem for some women

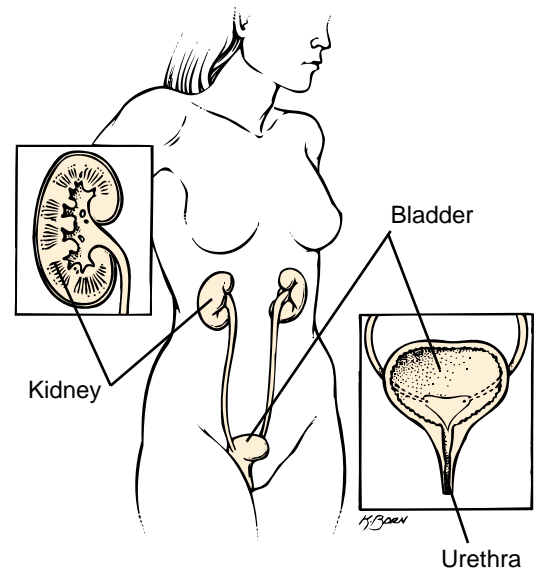
## What causes urinary tract infections?

Most urinary tract infections are caused by bacteria. Any part of your urinary tract can become infected. The urinary tract includes the kidneys, ureters, bladder and urethra. The *kidneys* take waste out of the blood. The *ureters* carry the waste (urine) from the kidneys to the bladder. The *bladder* stores the urine. The *urethra* is the tiny tube that empties the bladder when you urinate.

## What do urinary tract infections feel like?

Urinary tract infections can be painful for some women. If you have an infection, you may have any of the signs listed in the box below.

Some women may feel pressure in the lower stomach, have low back pain, feel nauseated and tired, and run a low-grade fever. These might be signs of an infection in the kidneys.



### Signs of a urinary tract infection

- A burning sensation when you urinate
- Feeling like you need to urinate more often than usual
- Feeling the urge to urinate but not being able to
- Leaking a little urine
- Urine that smells bad
- Cloudy, dark or bloody urine

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## **Why do women have urinary tract infections more often than men?**

Women tend to have urinary tract infections more often than men do because bacteria can reach the bladder more easily in women. The urethra is shorter in women than in men, so bacteria have a shorter distance to travel.

The urethra is also located near the rectum in women. Bacteria from the rectum can easily travel up the urethra and cause infections. Wiping from the back to the front after a bowel movement can bring bacteria from the rectum to the urethra.

Having sex may also cause urinary tract infections in women because bacteria can be pushed into the urethra. Using a diaphragm can lead to infections because diaphragms push against the urethra and make it harder to completely empty the bladder. The urine that stays in the bladder is more likely to collect bacteria and cause infections.

Pregnant women seem to get infections of the kidneys more often than other women. Pregnancy may make it easier for infections to happen because carrying a baby puts pressure on the ureters and because pregnancy causes changes in hormones.

## **How are urinary tract infections treated?**

If your family doctor thinks you have a urinary tract infection, he or she will probably test a sample of your urine to find out if bacteria are in it. Your doctor will then prescribe an antibiotic for you if you have an infection. Usually, symptoms of the infection go away a day or two after you start taking the medicine.

Your doctor may give you one big dose of medicine, or medicine to take for several days or more. Your doctor may also give you a medicine to numb your urinary tract and make you feel better while the antibiotic starts to work. The medicine colors your urine bright orange, so don't be alarmed by the color when you urinate.

If you have infections often, your doctor may give you a low dose of medicine for several months or more to prevent the infections from coming back.

If having sex seems to cause your infections, your doctor may suggest that you take a single antibiotic pill after you have sex to prevent urinary tract infections.

## **How serious are urinary tract infections?**

Urinary tract infections can be painful. But today's medicines keep urinary tract infections from becoming a serious threat to your health.

If you have urinary tract infections often, you can take some steps to help prevent them. The box on the next page gives you some suggestions for preventing urinary tract infections. Your family doctor can help you decide what changes would be helpful for you to make.

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### Tips on preventing urinary tract infections

- Drink plenty of water to flush out bacteria. (Drinking cranberry juice may also help prevent urinary tract infections, though this hasn't been proved.)
- Don't hold your urine. Urinate when you feel like you need to.
- Wipe from front to back after bowel movements.
- Urinate after having sex to help wash away bacteria.
- Use enough lubrication during sex. Try using a small amount of lubricant (such as K-Y Jelly or Liquid) before sex if you're a little dry.
- If you get urinary tract infections often, you may want to avoid using the diaphragm as a method of birth control. Ask your doctor about other birth control choices.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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