

Chlamydia

Chlamydia is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) which in Spain was practically under control, as was the case of many other STIs. The number of people infected with this and other STIs has risen again since 2000, especially in the period between 2002 and 2003.

Although anyone can get Chlamydia, some groups, most notably young women and gay men, are more vulnerable to this STI.

Transmission

Chlamydia is an infection caused by bacteria called *Chlamydia trachomatis*. It can be transmitted during anal, oral and vaginal sex if no condom is used (unprotected sex), and can affect the anus, penis, cervix, throat and eyes.

Untreated Chlamydia may make a person with HIV more infectious as Chlamydia can cause breaks in the mucous membranes (the barriers) of affected areas, and increases the number of HIV-infected cells in those areas. Having Chlamydia can also make it more likely that an HIV-negative person will be infected with HIV if they are exposed to the virus.

Chlamydia can also be passed on from mother to child during child birth and can affect the baby's eyes, and cause pneumonia.

Prevention

Using a condom for anal, oral or vaginal sex is an effective way of avoiding infection with Chlamydia or passing the infection on to somebody else. People who are sexually active are advised to have regular sexual health check-ups, where they will be tested for Chlamydia and other sexually transmitted infections. Most HIV treatment centres have an associated sexual health clinic, where confidential and free treatment can be obtained without referral from your general practitioner or HIV doctor (see InfoVIHtal #25: 'Sexual Health Check-ups').

Symptoms

Symptoms of Chlamydia normally occur one to three weeks after infection. However, many people who have Chlamydia are unaware that they have the infection. It is thought that as many as 75 per cent of women with Chlamydia, and 50 per cent of men with Chlamydia have no symptoms.

In the case of men, symptoms usually consist of a milky discharge from the penis, particularly in the morning, and a burning sensation when urinating. Chlamydia can also cause the testicles to swell. If a person has been infected anally, there may be soreness around the anus and a discharge.

Women with Chlamydia may notice a milky discharge from the vagina and/or lower abdominal or back pain, or pain when having sex. There may also be vaginal bleeding during sex and bleeding between periods.

If Chlamydia is left untreated it can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease in women, which can cause ectopic pregnancy, infertility, and even death in extreme cases. Men are less likely to develop serious complications, though untreated Chlamydia may cause infertility. Both men and women may develop arthritis as a consequence of untreated Chlamydia.

Diagnosis

A sexual health check-up to screen for STIs will include a blood test for Chlamydia. Sexual health check-ups are free of charge and confidential and can be performed in public STI clinics. Your General Practitioner may also refer you to specialists in STI or primary health clinics (CAP). Several hospitals with infectious diseases units may also offer sexual health screenings.

Chlamydia is diagnosed by taking a swab from the penis or cervix. The swabs can be a little uncomfortable but are very quick to take. Some clinics also examine a urine sample for evidence of infection with Chlamydia.

Treatment

Chlamydia is treated with antibiotics. Normally this consists of a seven day course of doxycycline, or a single dose of azithromycin. It is important to take all your tablets to ensure that the infection is eradicated from your body. Symptoms may persist for a few days after taking azithromycin as the antibiotic takes time to work.

When Chlamydia is diagnosed you may be given the opportunity to see a Health Adviser. Health Advisers can give you information about safe sex and how to protect your own sexual health as well as your stable or occasional partner/s'.

You may be also asked to return a week later for a test to see that you have been cured. It is also strongly advised not to have anal, oral or vaginal sex (even with a condom) until your treatment period is finished. This is to prevent re-infection.