

Gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that up until the year 2000 was considered to have been almost eradicated in Spain. However, Spanish Health Authorities and NGOs are worried by the increasing number of cases of gonorrhoea, particularly among men who have sex with men (MSM) and young heterosexuals of both sexes. Immigrants are also at risk.

Transmission

Gonorrhoea can be passed on during oral, anal, vaginal and mouth-to-anus (rimming) sexual intercourse. This infection can affect the anus, penis, cervix and throat. Untreated gonorrhoea can boost HIV transmission since it causes an increase in the number of HIV-infected cells in the genital area and in the mucous membranes of the mouth and throat. Similarly, gonorrhoea in HIV-negative people can increase the possibility of their contracting HIV if they are exposed to it.

Gonorrhoea can also be passed on from mother to child (MTCT) during labour and can cause infection in the newborn's eyes, resulting in blindness if left untreated (see *InfoVIHtal #42 Mother-to-child transmission*).

Prevention

Using a condom during oral, anal or vaginal sex is an effective way of preventing the transmission of gonorrhoea or of passing the bacteria on to somebody else. Sexually active people are advised to have regular check-ups, where they will be tested for gonorrhoea and other STIs (see *InfoVIHtal # 25 Sexual Health Check-ups*).

Symptoms

Symptoms of gonorrhoea usually appear between two and ten days after infection. However, some people may not realise that they have the infection as symptoms may not always be present, or may be mild. In men, symptoms usually consist of a greenish or yellowish discharge from the penis and a burning sensation while urinating. There may be swelling and soreness in the testicles.

Symptoms in women can include a burning sensation when passing urine and a discoloured or bloody discharge from the vagina. If the infection is rectal, both

men and women may notice a mucous type or bloody discharge from the anus, and pain in the area or when having anal sex. Gonorrhoea may also cause irritation to the throat.

If left untreated, gonorrhoea can cause serious health problems, such as painful pelvic infections, infertility and ectopic pregnancy (in women) and testicular problems (in men).

Gonorrhoea can also spread to the bloodstream causing fever, and can also lead to swelling of the joints and arthritic-like pain.

Diagnosis

A general sexual health check-up will include a gonorrhoea test. Sexual health check-ups are free and confidential. You can go to a public STI clinic or also to a CAP (Centro de Atención Primaria, a Spanish health care centre) so that your GP can refer you to these centres. The infectious disease units of some hospitals may also offer sexual health screens.

To test for gonorrhoea, a swab is taken from the tip of the penis or from the cervix. If you have informed your doctor that you have engaged in oral or anal sex, swabs will also be taken from the throat and/or anus. The swabs can be a little uncomfortable. Sometimes a urine sample is taken to check for the presence of gonorrhoea. Usually, it is possible to tell immediately upon examination of the swabs taken from the penis and in most cases from the cervix if gonorrhoea is present, but gonorrhoea in the throat takes longer to diagnose. However, regardless of where the infection is found, it can take up to three days for tests to provide conclusive results. Therefore, it is important to contact your clinic to find out the results of the tests so that you can start treatment if the bacteria have been located.

Treatment

Gonorrhoea is treated with antibiotics. Penicillin or ciprofloxacin are the antibiotics commonly used as first choice in treating the infection. However, over 10% of gonorrhoea cases are now penicillin resistant. As a result, clinics now use ceftriaxone or spectinomycin as first choice for gonorrhoea treatment. Both drugs must be administered via injection.

After gonorrhoea has been diagnosed, some health centres offer the possibility of consulting a Health Adviser. Health Advisers can inform you about issues such as safe sex and sexual health that will help you to protect yourself and your sexual partners, whether they are casual or long-term.

You will also be asked to return seven days later to undergo tests to confirm whether you have been cured. It is also strongly advisable to abstain from anal, oral or vaginal intercourse (even using a condom) while under treatment in order to prevent a possible re-infection.