

Chlamydia

What is chlamydia?

Chlamydia is the most common sexually transmitted infection in Australia. It is caused by a bacterium called “Chlamydia Trachomatis”. It may be undiagnosed because it doesn’t always cause symptoms, but is easily treatable by taking a short course of antibiotics. If untreated, it can lead to more serious complications, e.g. Infertility, chronic pain, ectopic pregnancy, PID (Pelvic Inflammatory Disease, which may lead to infertility). There is an increased risk of complications of an STI after having a termination of pregnancy, hence the reason for testing for Chlamydia at the time of the procedure.

What are the symptoms?

Most people with chlamydia do not have any symptoms and are unaware they have the infection. 40% of men and 70% of women have no symptoms. If symptoms are present, most often they are trivial. Some people may complain of burning when passing urine, a clear, white or yellow discharge from the penis, swollen or sore testes, a vaginal discharge or some pain, noted especially during intercourse. Chlamydia may be easily detected by a simple urine test (males) or a vaginal swab test (women) or an anal swab (if anal sex has occurred). These tests may be done on your own in privacy.

How is it spread?

Chlamydia is a sexually transmitted infection and can easily spread from one person to the other usually by vaginal, but also by anal or oral sex. If symptoms occur, they usually appear about 2 weeks after intercourse, although the incubation period may be as long as 3 months and as short as 5-10 days. In females, if untreated, chlamydia may spread through the uterus to the fallopian tubes, causing salpingitis, a painful condition, which may result in infertility (not being able to have children) or ectopic pregnancy (where the pregnancy develops outside the uterus and may be potentially life threatening). In some cases, infection of the whole reproductive system – pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) can occur. In males, chlamydia may cause urethritis, which can produce a discharge from the penis or pain when urinating. If not treated, it can lead to inflammation near the testes, which can cause considerable pain and may lead to infertility.

How is it treated?

Fortunately, chlamydia may be easily treated. Taking a single course of antibiotics called azithromycin is the first line treatment. Complicated chlamydia infections may require longer courses of antibiotics as well, usually doxycycline for 10-14 days. Partners of people with chlamydia must be treated, as it is very likely they have the infection also. It is important to NOT have sex whilst taking the tablets and for one week after treatment. If your partner receives treatment for chlamydia, do not have sex until at least a week after both of you have been treated. If you don’t feel comfortable telling a previous or current sexual partner about the infection, there are 2 websites enabling you to send a free and anonymous text message or email (www.letthemknow.org.au, or www.thedramadownunder.info/notify (for gay men)).

Who is at risk?

You can’t tell by looking at someone whether they have chlamydia or not. So, if you’re having sex without a condom, you are taking a risk. You are most at risk if you are aged less than 25 (women), if you have had a recent change of sexual partner and don’t use any barrier contraception, e.g. condoms. Overall men and women aged between 15-29 account for 82% of diagnoses of whole population. It is important to know that other sexually transmitted infections may also be present. You should have a blood test in 3 month’s time to detect other sexually transmitted infections plus another test for chlamydia to make sure it has gone away and that you have not been re-infected.

How do you prevent it?

Condoms are the best way to protect you both from chlamydia and other STIs. Always use condoms during vaginal and anal sex, and dental dams during oral sex, until you’re totally sure that both you and your partner don’t have an STI. Have an STI check up, including chlamydia test, after having sex with a new or casual partner, or immediately if symptoms occur or if a sexual partner has chlamydia or symptoms of chlamydia.