



## Bladder infections in women

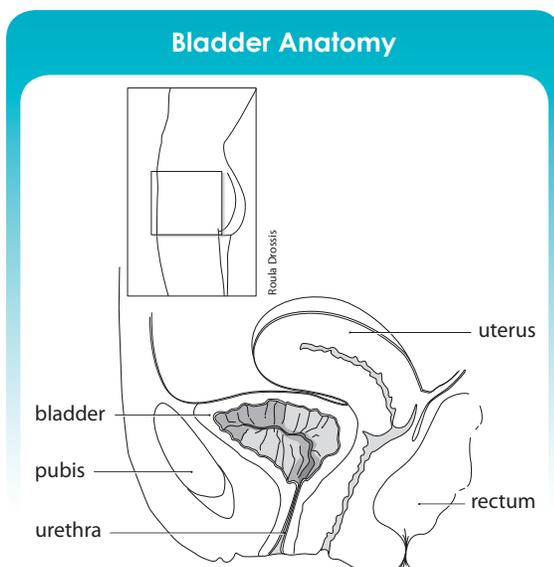
It is common for women to get bladder infections but they are often easy to treat. These infections don't usually become serious problems.

### What does the bladder do?

- The bladder holds urine made by the kidneys and delivered through the ureters.
- Messages from nerves in your brain and spinal cord let you know when to empty your bladder.
- When your bladder is full, bladder muscles squeeze to push urine into the urethra. (See diagram: *Bladder Anatomy*)

### What is a bladder infection?

- About 5% of women have bladder infections each year.
- Bladder infection (called cystitis when there is inflammation):
  - Is often easy to treat.
  - Usually comes on quickly.
  - Can be painful.
  - Causes you to feel that you need to urinate all of a sudden.



### How do I know if I have a bladder infection?

- Mild symptoms include:
  - Pain, burning or stinging when you urinate.
  - Feeling as if you need to urinate again soon after going to the toilet.
  - Urine that's dark, cloudy or has a bad smell.
- More serious symptoms include:
  - Severe pain in your lower back near your ribs or lower abdomen.
  - Vomiting and nausea
  - Fever
  - If you do have these symptoms, you may have a more serious kidney infection.
  - For more information see section: *When is it important to see my doctor?*

### What causes bladder infections?

- It is normal for many kinds of bacteria to grow in the bowel, the vagina and on the skin.
- Usually, the bladder and urine are free of germs and bacteria.
- Bacteria can get into the bladder through the urethra and cause a bladder infection.
- Once in a while, you may not have any symptoms even if bacteria are growing in your bladder.
- Without symptoms, you usually do not need to be treated.

## Why do women get bladder infections more often than men?

- Women have a shorter urethra so bacteria can get into the bladder more easily. (See diagram: *Bladder Anatomy*)
- Bacteria may also enter when you have sexual intercourse.
- It is important to understand that you do **not** pass bacteria causing bladder infection to your sexual partners.

## Are there other problems that feel like a bladder infection?

- If you have inflammation (redness, swelling, soreness) in the bladder, urethra or vagina:
  - You may also have problems with urinating like a bladder infection.
  - You may also feel discomfort when you urinate.
  - Your symptoms will come on slowly, not quickly.
- Vaginal infections often have milder symptoms such as:
  - Itching.
  - Fluid or mucus from your vagina.
  - Uncomfortable sex.

## How is a bladder infection diagnosed?

- The diagnosis of a bladder infection depends on:
  - Your symptoms.
  - Bacteria or signs of inflammation in your urine.
  - The way your symptoms react to treatment (such as if antibiotics work).
- A urine test is very important.
  - You can get quick results right in your doctor's office (urinalysis).
  - It may show that there is inflammation.
  - It **cannot** tell what type of bacteria is causing infection.
- To confirm a diagnosis of bladder infection:
  - Your doctor needs to identify the specific bacteria.
  - Your urine test must sit in a lab for 2-3 days to identify the bacteria (called a urine culture).
- It is possible that testing may still not provide definite results.

## What is the treatment for bladder infection?

- Many times, a bladder infection will cure itself without medication.
- Taking antibiotics for a short period of time:
  - Will cure your bladder infection faster.
  - Will reduce your symptoms.
  - Is usually taken for fewer than five days.
- Long-term antibiotics cost more and have more side effects.

## Will my bladder infection come back?

- Many women get another bladder infection within one year.
- A repeat bladder infection is often unpredictable.
- Your lifestyle and personal cleanliness do not usually cause bladder infections.

## How can I help prevent bladder infections?

- Drink enough fluids (preferably water).
- Empty your bladder regularly as it helps to flush out any bacteria.
- Natural or alternative ways may help to reduce your risk of bladder infections, such as:
  - Taking cranberry or vitamin C to lower the acid level in your urine.
  - Eating yogurt with "active cultures."
- It is important to know that the benefit of some natural or alternative ways may not yet be scientifically proven.
- Diaphragms and spermicides for birth control may increase your risk of bladder infection.
  - It may help if you urinate right after sexual activity (*but avoid vaginal douches*).
- After menopause, estrogen replacement may reduce your risk (ask your doctor about this).
- Low doses of antibiotics may be taken up to several months to help prevent bladder infections.

## Is it possible for me to treat a bladder infection myself?

- If you keep getting bladder infections:
  - It is unlikely that you will need more urine cultures or other tests like x-rays or bladder exams (cystoscopy).
  - You may be able to treat yourself with antibiotics that are prescribed ahead of time.
- If your bladder infection seems to happen when you have sex, it may be helpful to:
  - Take a single dose of antibiotic just after sexual activity **OR**
  - Take a single dose of antibiotic at the time of sexual activity.
- Taking some of the above steps may help stop your infection from becoming a regular problem.

## When is it important to see my doctor?

- Can see blood in your urine.
- Have a fever.
- Are vomiting.
- Have pain in the area between your ribs and hips (flank).
- Still have bladder symptoms after treatment.
- Regularly have infections.

### Bottom Line

- Bladder infections in women are common and usually not hard to diagnose.
- There is treatment that will quickly relieve your symptoms.
- Treatment will let you get back to your to normal life.

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