

Chlamydia, the silent epidemic

By Raksha Joshi, M.D.

Chlamydia is one of the most prevalent sexually transmitted infections (STI) in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that more than three million cases occur each year. Chlamydia is four times more common than gonorrhea and six times more common than herpes. Chlamydia is caused by the bacterium *Chlamydia trachomatis*.

Chlamydia has been called the “silent epidemic” because 75 percent of infected women and half of infected men will have no symptoms. If symptoms occur, they start approximately one to three weeks after exposure.

Chlamydia infection can occur via vaginal, anal or oral sex. Symptoms in women include abnormal yellowish, pus-containing vaginal discharge, burning during urination and lower abdominal pain. All these symptoms might be mild, however, prompting the woman to disregard them. Men might experience unusual discharge from the penis or discomfort during urination.

In women, Chlamydia infection is particularly dangerous because it can cause serious, irreversible damage without the woman ever knowing she has the infection. Damage occurs when the infection moves up from the cervix into the fallopian tubes and causes scarring. The scarring can block the tubes and cause infertility by preventing the egg from traveling from the ovary to the uterus. Other possible conditions include: ectopic pregnancy, where the pregnancy lodges in the fallopian tube due to scarring or the tube’s narrowing; chronic pelvic pain, sometimes with inflammation; or menstrual irregularities such as bleeding between menstrual periods. Four in 10 women infected with Chlamydia suffer these serious consequences if they are not diagnosed and treated.

The best way to avoid infection is to avoid sexual intercourse, regardless of whether the sex is vaginal, anal or oral. Because abstinence is almost impossible for most people, the next best safeguard is to have a mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who is not infected, to avoid having sex with numerous partners and to always use barrier protection such as a condom.

The best way to diagnose this silent infection is to screen for the disease during each gynecological examination in all young, sexually active women under age 25, as the infection is especially prevalent in this age group. Older women whose lifestyle puts them at risk also be tested. In addition, all sexual partners should also be treated if the woman’s test is positive. Pregnant women should be tested and treated because Chlamydia can cause infection of the infant’s eyes and pneumonia.

Once the infection is diagnosed, it can be treated using a course of the appropriate antibiotic. Both partners must be treated concurrently and sexual intercourse avoided until completion of treatment to avoid re-infection.

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