Gonorrhea

Recently, your healthcare provider performed a laboratory test that has revealed that you tested positive for a sexually transmitted disease called gonorrhea. Gonorrhea is caused by Neisseria gonorrhoeae, a bacterium that can grow and multiply easily in the warm, moist areas of the reproductive tract, including the cervix (opening to the womb), uterus (womb), fallopian tubes (egg canals) in women, and in the urethra (urine canal) in women and men. The bacterium can also grow in the mouth, throat, eyes, and anus. Gonorrhea is the second most common sexually transmitted bacterial infection in the United States behind chlamydia. Gonorrhea infection may be the result of engaging in unsafe sex, having sex with multiple sexual partners, having sex with someone who has multiple partners, or having a history of sexually transmitted infections. Gonorrhea can be easily treated with antibiotics; but if left untreated, serious complications may arise as outlined above.

Gonorrhea Background Information

Gonorrhea is a very common infectious disease. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that almost one million people are infected with gonorrhea each year. Approximately 75% of all cases are found in young people ages 15-29. Although gonorrhea is the second most common sexually transmitted bacterial infection in the United States, many people do not know they have it because lack of noticeable symptoms. Approximately 50% of infected men and women do not know they have gonorrhea. People who do not have symptoms may pass the infection to their sex partners without knowing. Gonorrhea is also known as clap, drip or GC. Gonorrhea is a serious health threat for women, and when left untreated, can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID can cause serious damage to a woman’s reproductive organs and can lead to infertility, chronic pelvic pain and an increased risk of ectopic pregnancy (a pregnancy that occurs outside the uterus). If you are a pregnant woman and are infected with gonorrhea, you are at greater risk of delivering your child prematurely. You may also pass the infection on to your child at birth and your child could encounter health complications.

Signs and Symptoms

Symptoms of gonorrhea usually appear 2 - 5 days after infection, however, in men, symptoms may take up to a month to appear. Some people do not have symptoms. They may be completely unaware that they have caught the disease, and therefore do not seek treatment. This increases the risk of complications and the chances of passing the infection on to another person.

Symptoms in men include:

- Burning and pain while urinating
- Increased urinary frequency or urgency
- Discharge from the penis (white, yellow, or green in color)
- Red or swollen opening of penis (urethra)
- Tender or swollen testicles
- Sore throat
GONORRHEA

Symptoms in women can be very mild or non-specific, and may be mistaken for another type of infection. They include:

- Vaginal discharge
- Burning and pain while urinating
- Increased urination
- Sore throat
- Painful sexual intercourse
- Severe pain in lower abdomen (if the infection spreads to the fallopian tubes and stomach area)
- Fever (if the infection spreads to the fallopian tubes and stomach area)

Follow-up and Treatment Options for Gonorrhea

There are two goals in treating a sexually transmitted disease, especially one as easily spread as gonorrhea. The first is to cure the infection in the patient. The second is to locate and test all of the other people the person had sexual contact with and treat them to prevent further spread of the disease.

Once diagnosed, gonorrhea is easy to treat and can be cured quickly. Several antibiotics can successfully cure gonorrhea in adolescents and adults. However, drug-resistant strains of gonorrhea are increasing in many areas of the world, including the United States. Because of these drug resistant strains, gonorrhea is becoming increasingly difficult to treat.

Penicillin used to be given to patients with gonorrhea, but it is not often used anymore because some types of the gonorrhea bacteria no longer respond to the drug. This is called antibiotic resistance. Antibiotic resistance is a major public health threat in which bacteria cannot be killed with the usual antibiotic medicines. Because many people with gonorrhea also have chlamydia, another STD, antibiotics for both infections are usually given together. Persons with gonorrhea should be tested for other STDs.

To minimize your risk for gonorrhea infection, you should:

- Use latex condoms, when used consistently and correctly, they can reduce the risk of transmission of gonorrhea;
- Remain in a monogamous relationship;
- Abstain from sexual intercourse;
- Limit your number of sexual partners;
- Include gonorrhea screening as part of your annual examination or when you have your first prenatal visit.

Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Provider

- What do my results mean?
- For my condition, what follow-up options do I have?
- What do you recommend and why?
- How can I prevent this from happening again?
- When do you suggest a repeat gonorrhea test?
- Should I be tested for any other sexually transmitted diseases?

Sources for Additional Information

- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases: www.niaid.nih.gov
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: www.cdc.gov
- American Social Health Association: www.ashastd.org

The content on this handout is provided to you as general information and not intended as a diagnosis. Please consult with your physician regarding the essential details about your condition.