

# Urethral Discharge in Men

## What is urethral discharge?

The urethra is a small tube in a man's penis with an opening at the tip. Urethral discharge is any liquid other than urine or semen that comes out of this opening. The discharge may be clear, white, yellow, green or rust-colored.

## What causes it?

Urethral discharge can be a sign of an infection, called "urethritis." Most often, this type of infection is the result of a sexually transmitted disease (STD). The same bacteria and protozoa that cause certain STDs such as gonorrhea, chlamydia, and trichomoniasis also cause urethritis.

## What are the symptoms?

In addition to discharge, symptoms may include a burning sensation inside the penis and the urge to pee often.

Unfortunately, an infection may also be present without any other visible signs or symptoms. Even if you don't have any symptoms, you could still be infected with an STD. This means you could unknowingly spread it to your partner during sex (oral, anal, and vaginal). Call your doctor right away if you have any of these symptoms, or if you have had sex without a condom and believe you might have an STD.

## What are the complications of untreated STDs?

It depends on the type of STD. STDs can lead to infections in the urinary tract. Untreated gonorrhea can spread into the blood and cause joint pain, skin sores, or heart valve damage. Chlamydia can cause a bladder infection, sterility, arthritis, or recurring and painful pelvic infections. In women, both chlamydia and gonorrhea can spread into the uterus and fallopian tubes, and cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) and pelvic pain. Chlamydia and gonorrhea can also cause fertility problems in men.

The good news is that both chlamydia and gonorrhea are easily diagnosed, and effective treatments are available.

## How can I reduce my risk?

To reduce your risk of getting urethritis or an STD, you should:

- Limit yourself to one uninfected sexual partner.
- Use condoms. Latex condoms, when used correctly every time you have sex, can lower the risk of spreading STDs such as chlamydia and gonorrhea, as well as HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Using birth control such as Depo-Provera ("the shot"), emergency contraception (Plan B), spermicides, or diaphragms *does not* provide reliable protection against STDs or HIV.
- Communicate honestly and openly with a partner about your sexual history.

## How can I get tested?

Call your doctor or nurse practitioner if you think you might have an infection, or if you want to be tested for an STD. We are here to help you. Testing usually includes a swab of the urethra or rectum and a urine test, or both. To get the best care possible, it is important to talk to your doctor honestly about your sexual activity. If you are diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease, be sure to tell your sexual partner(s) and encourage them to get tested even if they do not have any symptoms.

## What is the treatment?

Urethritis usually gets better with the correct medicine. Your doctor will probably prescribe antibiotics. Tell your doctor if you have any allergies to medications. Once you begin your treatment, be sure to:

- Take the medicine as directed until all of the pills are gone, even if your symptoms disappear within a few days.
- Do not have any form of sex (oral, anal, or vaginal) until you and your partner have finished taking all of the medication.

Call your doctor or other medical professional if your symptoms return after you have finished all of your medication.

## What can I expect after treatment?

You may see a clear or white discharge from the tip of the penis. This is usually a normal secretion from the urethra. Both gonorrhea and chlamydia are often completely cured with proper treatment. Men who have been treated for urethritis caused by gonorrhea sometimes develop another form of urethritis later on. Ask your doctor or other medical professional if you notice any new symptoms, or if you have any questions or concerns.

## Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at **kp.org** to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

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