Urethritis and Urethral Discharge in Men

If you have a discharge from your penis (urethral discharge) you are likely to have a sexually transmitted infection which you can pass on to others. See a doctor for a test, even if symptoms go.

What is urethritis and what causes it?

Urethritis means inflammation of the urethra. The urethra is the tube between the bladder and the end of the penis. Urethritis is usually caused by a sexually transmitted infection (STI) but not always. It can occur within a stable relationship.

- **Gonorrhoea** is one type of STI which can cause urethritis. See the separate leaflet called Gonorrhoea for more details.
- **Non-gonococcal urethritis (NGU)** is the term used to describe urethritis caused by anything other than gonorrhoea. Infection with a germ (bacterium) - either *Chlamydia trachomatis* or *Mycoplasma genitalium* - is the common cause of NGU. It can also be caused by a variety of other germs (bacteria or viruses). NGU may rarely have a non-infective cause, such as trauma or blockage or a reaction to a soap or cream. As often as not, no cause can be found See the separate leaflet called Non-gonococcal Urethritis for more details.
- **Both.** Some men have gonococcal and non-gonococcal urethritis at the same time.
- **No obvious cause** can be found in up to three out of ten men with urethritis.

Who gets urethritis?

You are at higher risk of getting inflammation of the urethra (urethritis) if you are sexually active, aged under 25 and have had a recent partner change. Men who have sex with men and those who have unprotected vaginal intercourse are also at higher risk.

What are the symptoms of urethritis?

- A fluid (discharge) from the end of the penis is common but does not always occur.
- Pain or burning when you pass urine. This may be confused with a urine infection.
- You may have soreness or irritation inside the penis, or a feeling of wanting to pass urine frequently.
- Some men with urethritis never develop any symptoms. For example, up to half of men with *chlamydial infection* (the most common cause of NGU) do not have any symptoms.

How does urethritis progress?

Occasionally, symptoms may clear without treatment but may take months to do so. If your condition has been caused by an infection, germs (bacteria) may still be present, even if the symptoms have gone.

**Therefore, you are still likely to be infectious and can still pass on the infection even if symptoms go.** One bacterium that commonly causes inflammation of the urethra (urethritis) in men (*chlamydia*) can cause serious problems in women. It is important that you get tested, and treated if necessary, in order to prevent complications for yourself and others. You can read about possible complications in the separate leaflets called Gonorrhoea and Non-gonococcal Urethritis.

What should I do if I have symptoms of urethritis?

- If you suspect that you have urethritis then contact your local genitourinary (GUM clinic) or see your GP.
In the UK, you can go to the local GUM clinic without a referral from your GP. You can ring the local hospital or health authority and ask where the nearest clinic is, or find one on the internet - for example, through the "Find a Clinic" service provided by the Family Planning Association (FPA).

You may be asked to have tests for HIV, hepatitis and syphilis, as people with inflammation of the urethra (urethritis) sometimes have these conditions as well.

Men who have sex with men may also need to have swabs taken from the back of the throat (pharynx) and back passage (rectum).

The GUM clinic will protect your confidentiality but, if they confirm you have an infection, they may want to contact anyone you had sex with up to three months before you were diagnosed. This is called 'contact tracing'.

Medicines called antibiotics will usually clear an infection. The antibiotic prescribed depends on the cause. Make sure you complete the course.

If your urethritis is due to an infection such as gonorrhoea it is vital that you have another test after you have been treated to make sure the infection has been cured. This will usually be done seven days after treatment.

Tell your sexual partner(s) to see their doctor or go to a GUM clinic, even if they have no symptoms. Many women with sexually transmitted infections do not have symptoms.

Don't have sex (including oral and anal sex) until you and your sexual partner(s) have completed tests and treatment. You should wait seven days after you have had your treatment course to avoid passing on the infection: your doctor will advise.

Further reading & references

- BASHH 2015 UK National Guideline on the management of non-gonococcal urethritis; International Journal of STD & AIDS
- Management of gonorrhoea; British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (2011)
- Sexually Transmitted Infections in Primary Care; Royal College of General Practitioners and British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (Apr 2013)
- Urethritis - male; NICE CKS, July 2015 (UK access only)

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