

Urinary Tract Infection

What is a Urinary Tract Infection (UTI)?

A UTI is an infection within the urinary system. The infection can be in the kidneys, ureters (the tube that carries urine from the kidney to the bladder), the urethra (the tube through which urine leaves the body) or the bladder. Infections affecting the urinary tract are very common and affect most women at least once in their lifetime. They can occur at any time but are most likely in women who are sexually active, pregnant or have been through the menopause.

What causes a UTI?

UTIs can be caused by bacteria entering the urethra and moving up into the bladder. The most common bacteria causing an infection is E. coli (Escherichia coli). This tends to more commonly occur in women, because the opening of the bottom (anus) is so close to the opening of the urethra where urine comes out. The urethra in women is shorter than that in a man which makes it easier for the bacteria to access the urinary tract.

Other factors may include:

- Not drinking enough fluids. You should aim to drink 8 glasses of fluid every day to prevent dehydration (1.5- 2 litres fluid)
- Alcohol can cause dehydration, increasing the risk of a UTI
- Medicines or conditions which weaken your immunity, for example diabetes
- Pregnancy
- Having a catheter (either indwelling or intermittent)
- A bladder that doesn't emptying completely, for example related to an enlarged prostate in men, or a prolapse womb or bladder
- Other conditions that can block the urinary tract, for example, kidney stones
- Sexual intercourse
- Constipation
- Bladder and / or bowel incontinence, can increase the risk of infection
- Perfumed soaps , wet wipes etc, can cause inflammation of the delicate genital skin and wash away vaginal secretions.

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What are the common symptoms of a UTI?

- Many people have little or no symptoms but some experience the following changes:
 - Dark coloured or strong-smelling urine.
 - The need to pass urine more frequently.
 - A sudden need to dash to the toilet to pass urine (urgency)
 - Burning/stinging when you pass urine.
 - Passing cloudy urine.
 - Being incontinent of urine, when normally you are not
 - Blood in your urine.
 - Tenderness or pain in the lower part of your abdomen
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- Other symptoms may include
 - Pain in your back or side
 - A high temperature above 38C.
 - A very low temperature below 36C.
 - Feeling shivery or shaking uncontrollably, feeling hot then cold
 - Feeling of being cold /clammy skin.
 - A sudden onset of confusion or agitation, particularly in an older person.
 - Not passed urine all day.
 - Shortness of breath .
 - Sickness (nausea or vomiting)

It is really important not to ignore any of these symptoms and seek medical advice, as an untreated kidney infection can be serious if not promptly addressed.

How can I help prevent getting a UTI?

Keep hydrated. To prevent dehydration especially in warmer weather, you may need to increase your fluid intake. You should aim for 1.5-2 litres of water per day. Remember, alcohol can lead to dehydration

Check the colour of your urine. If it is dark orange/brown you may need to increase your fluid intake. Your urine should be a pale yellow colour. Be aware of how much urine you are passing at each time. If you are passing small amounts, increase the amount of fluid you are drinking.

Consider foods containing lots of water such as jellies, ice-lollies, soups, melons, cucumbers, tomatoes, strawberries, peaches, and oranges.

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What is good hygiene practice to prevent getting a UTI?

The following tips can help you avoid developing a UTI, particularly if you are prone to getting them.

- Everyone with a vagina should wipe front to back, after you go to the toilet, to prevent bacteria entering your urethra.
- If you experience constipation this can increase the risk of getting a UTI. See more information from Bladder & Bowel UK about constipation.
- Allow yourself time on the toilet to empty your bladder fully.
- Wear loose cotton underwear, and avoid wearing tight fitted synthetic underwear, tights and tight trousers.
- Shower rather than a bath.
- Sexual hygiene - passing urine and washing gently with warm water after sex can help reduce the amount of bacteria present.
- Avoid soaps, shower gels and intimate hygiene products (wet wipes or talcum powder); these can irritate the urethra.

Should I see my doctor about a UTI?

Sometimes simple changes as mentioned above can help flush things out. However do speak to your pharmacist, GP or nurse if you are worried or feel unwell as treatment may be required. Recurrent infections can cause considerable discomfort and distress, and you should speak to your medical professional who might recommend further investigation.

Further information

Find more information about adult bladder and bowel health in our information library at www.bbuk.org.uk. You can also contact the [Bladder & Bowel UK confidential helpline](tel:01612144591) (0161 214 4591).

For further advice on bladder and bowel problems speak to your GP or other healthcare professional.