

## The Sneaky Threat to Your Fertility

If caught in time, chlamydia is harmless. But left untreated, this incredibly common STD can ruin your chances of having kids one day. The worst part: It's usually symptom free, so you can't even tell you've been infected. Cosmo compiles the must-read facts.

By Stacey Colino

When you consider all the scary STDs out there, we're willing to bet that chlamydia barely flickers across your mental radar screen.

True, chlamydia is very common—with an estimated 2.8 million cases per year, more than half of them striking people under 25. But unlike herpes, chlamydia is curable. And it doesn't lead to cancer the way human papillomavirus (HPV) might. And then there's HIV, which can be fatal. Compared to these three, a bacterial infection such as chlamydia just doesn't seem to pose a threat.

But there is one fact about this STD that should move chlamydia to the top of your worry list: If left untreated, it can make it difficult—if not impossible—to have a baby.

"These days, the majority of infections that lead to infertility are from chlamydia," explains Mitchell Creinin, MD, director of gynecologic specialties at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

And because chlamydia often has no symptoms, it can damage your reproductive system with you none the wiser. "Many women only find out they have chlamydia when they try to conceive and run into problems," says Dr. Creinin.

Luckily, chlamydia is actually easy to prevent and detect—before it does a number on your baby-making ability. Read on for all the details.

### 1 Chlamydia Is Very Easy to Catch

Chlamydia is a bacterial STD that is spread through semen, pre-ejaculate, and vaginal secretions. Have unprotected intercourse or just mess around with an infected partner and the bacteria quickly enters your vagina and attacks nearby tissue. This causes a localized infection of your urethra and/or cervix—usually within one to three weeks of exposure. But vaginal sex isn't the only way you can contract it. Chlamydia targets any soft, moist mucous membranes, so performing oral sex on a guy who has the disease can sometimes transmit the bacteria to your mouth or throat, leading to an infection of the tissues there that would feel similar to a sore throat. And anal intercourse may also trigger an infection of the anal or rectal lining, says Dr. Creinin.

### 2 If You Had It, You Might Not Know It

Seventy-five percent of women and 50 percent of men who become infected show no symptoms, reports the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

And when red flags do appear, they're often vague or mild. We're talking abdominal discomfort, burning during urination, a yellowish discharge, spotting, and/or pain during sex, explains Paula J. Adams Hillard, MD, professor of ob-gyn at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine. Because these symptoms can be mistaken for signs of less serious conditions, you're liable to blow them off completely.

### 3 Women Are at a Higher Risk

Women are diagnosed at more than three times the rate guys are, and young women are especially vulnerable. One reason: Females have a larger genital area through which the bacteria can enter. For a man to get it, chlamydia has to enter his pinhead-size urethra, which is a much smaller entry point than the vaginal opening. Also, "when women are young, much of the front of the cervix is made up of columnar cells, which are porous and can be infected easily," says Dr. Creinin. "By your mid- to late-20s, those columnar cells become squamous cells, which are more resistant to infection."

### 4 Birth-Control Pills May Make You More Susceptible

Don't chuck your Pill pack just yet, but some research shows that using hormonal contraception—such as the Pill, the patch, or the ring—could increase a woman's susceptibility to chlamydia because the hormones alter the cellular surface of the cervix in a way that makes it more vulnerable to infection, explains William Miller, MD, PhD, associate professor of medicine and epidemiology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

### 5 It May Hang Out With Another Infection

Chlamydia often goes hand in hand with gonorrhea—a bacterial STD that is less common (700,000 cases per year are estimated) yet is also asymptomatic in women. In a study at King's College Hospital in London, 39 percent of women with gonorrhea also had chlamydia, and 13 percent of women with chlamydia also had gonorrhea. Like chlamydia, gonorrhea may impair a woman's fertility if it's left untreated.

There's no biological reason why these two STDs buddy up; experts say it's just that people with one STD are likely to carry another. And the more partners you have, the higher the odds are that you'll pick one—or more—up, says Dr. Miller.

### 6 The Right Condom Can Protect You

Of course, the best way to avoid chlamydia is to get naked only with a guy who you know for a fact doesn't have it. But unless you accompany him to a doctor's office for testing, you can't be sure; he could be infected and not know it. Your most realistic defense against chlamydia then is—you guessed it—condoms. If they are used consistently and correctly, they can significantly decrease your risk of infection. Just any old love glove won't do; you have to use the latex kind. If worn at the beginning of a sex session, the latex barrier will prevent bacteria present in semen and/or pre-ejaculate from getting near your vagina. "Lambskin condoms won't protect you because they're porous," says Dr. Creinin. "And polyurethane condoms have not been studied enough to know if they're really effective."

#### 7 Regular Testing Can Catch It Early

Because so many chicks wind up with this silent, sneaky infection, the CDC recommends that all sexually active women ages 25 and under be screened once per year for chlamydia, even if they have no symptoms. Chlamydia testing is supposed to be a standard procedure at your annual gyno checkup: Your MD does a two-second swab of your cervix, then sends that cell sample to a lab, where it's tested for chlamydia and gonorrhea concurrently, says Ann Hone-brink, MD, assistant clinical professor of ob-gyn at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Results come back in one to three weeks.

Unfortunately, not all gynecologists test their young female patients for chlamydia each year, and not all young women make sure they're being screened. Statistics show that only 30 percent of females ages 16 to 25 insured by a commercial health plan were tested in 2003. So it's crucial that you tell your gyno you want to be screened. If you don't have a regular gyno, you can be tested by your primary-care physician, at your college health center, or at a low-cost clinic such as Planned Parenthood.

#### 8 If You're Positive, There's No Need to Panic

Being diagnosed with chlamydia can seem terrifying, but it doesn't have to be that big a deal. Taking a regimen of antibiotics will quickly get rid of the infection for good, says Dr. Honebrink. Just be sure to keep your clothes on for a week after you take the medication (in other words, no hanky-panky). Otherwise, it's possible to give it to your guy.

#### 9 Be On Guard for the Ping-Pong Effect

If you have a regular partner, you need to tell him about your diagnosis and make sure he sees an MD. "If you don't, the ping-pong effect will occur: After being cured, you go back to having sex without condoms with the man who gave it to you...and you get reinfected," says Dr. Hillard.

Reinfection is a major problem with chlamydia. In fact, one study found that up to 30 percent of young women tested positive for the disease again within one year of treatment. As an extra precaution, any woman diagnosed with chlamydia should go back to her gyno in three months for a retest...just to double-check that her partner didn't ping-pong it back to her.

#### 10 There Are Seriously Scary Consequences of Not Getting Treatment

Left untreated, the bacteria that have infected the cervix can migrate into the upper reproductive tract, leading to an infection known as pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), which can impair your fertility like this (see above). "To fight PID, your body generates thick scar tissue, which can damage and even block the fallopian tubes," says Dr. Creinin. Even when PID is treated with antibiotics, the damage or blockage remains, and in the future, when you're trying to have a baby, it can prevent sperm from reaching an egg. "About 35 percent of all infertility is due to fallopian-tube blockage, which is largely due to chlamydia," he says. The CDC estimates that up to 40 percent of women with untreated chlamydia develop PID.

Usually, PID has symptoms, which include nausea, fever, lower-ab aching, lower-back pain, and/or chronic pelvic pain. But some women don't experience signs, which means PID can be causing damage before you have a clue.

#### 11 PID Can Cut a Pregnancy Short

Women with PID who do conceive are more likely to experience an ectopic pregnancy—when a fertilized egg implants in the fallopian tube or elsewhere in the abdomen instead of in the uterus. In fact, a recent study from Norway found that women with a prior chlamydia infection had a twofold increased risk of ectopic pregnancy. Because an ectopic pregnancy can't be carried to term, it must be terminated. If not, the embryo may rupture the fallopian tube, causing internal bleeding that can be life threatening.

#### 12 Chlamydia

##### Has Another Consequence

Having chlamydia seems to boost your chances of getting HIV—if you are exposed to it. "As your body tries to fight off chlamydia, you produce white blood cells," says Dr. Miller. "Should you come into contact with HIV, the viral particles may attach more easily to these white blood cells and infect you." In fact, women with chlamydia have as much as a fivefold increased risk of getting infected with HIV after being -exposed to the virus, according to the CDC.

##### How It Strikes Guys

It's true that men are not as vulnerable to this STD as women are, mainly because the bacteria must enter through a

guy's urethra to cause infection, and as we mentioned earlier, the -urethral opening is very small. Plus, when guys do contract it, they're more likely to have symptoms and seek treatment. But, as with women, it can cause the same long-term harm to their fertility. Here's how: If left untreated, chlamydia can migrate from his penis to his testicles, -triggering the formation of scar tissue in his reproductive organs as well as inflammation that can decrease sperm mobility. Since the amount of his -ejaculate would be the same, an infected guy may never -realize the damage going on. Sources: William miller, MD, PhD; James Allen, MD, medical advisor of the American Social Health Association

#### THE ROUTE OF INFECTION

Untreated

The bacteria move into the uterus...  
and then infect the  
fallopian tube...  
causing damage that can lead to infertility.

#### Request the Test

Alarmed that gynos don't always screen for -chlamydia-and that many chicks don't ask for this test-Cosmo felt it was time to take action. This month, we're launching "Request the Test," our campaign to make sure every young woman asks for and receives an annual chlamydia test. Log on to [requestthetest.com](http://requestthetest.com) for info.