Urinary tract infection
(Cystitis)

A urinary tract infection (UTI) is an infection involving any part of the body’s urinary system – kidneys, ureters, bladder or urethra. UTIs are common, especially in women and the elderly. Bladder infection, also called cystitis, is the most common type of UTI.

Most UTIs are caused by bacteria which normally live harmlessly in the bowel. If these bacteria spread from the anus to the urethra and up into the urinary system they can cause:

- **urethritis** – infection in the urethra
- **cystitis** – infection in the bladder
- **pyelonephritis** – infection in the kidneys.

Most UTIs cannot be passed from person to person, and cannot be passed on during sex. However, some types of urethritis can be caused by sexually transmitted infections (e.g. chlamydia).

**Signs and symptoms**

The main signs and symptoms of cystitis are:

- a prickly, stinging or burning feeling when passing urine
- the urge to urinate often
- cloudy, bloody or smelly urine
- pain in the lower abdomen (belly).
Signs and symptoms of cystitis can be mild or severe.

Signs of UTI in children also include fever, being irritable, ‘wetting’ in a child who has been ‘dry’, and feeding problems in babies.

In elderly people, UTI may cause confusion or delirium.

Urethritis often causes burning when you pass urine, but usually the urine is not bloody or cloudy.

Kidney infection can cause fever, chills, nausea, vomiting and back pain, with or without the symptoms of cystitis.

Cystitis is not usually a serious condition. A kidney infection is serious and needs urgent treatment by a doctor.

Who is most at risk?

- **Women** – tend to get UTIs because their urethra is so short. Sexually active women are most at risk because sex can push bacteria into the urethra. UTIs can also be related to hormone changes such as the menstrual cycle, pregnancy and menopause. Women are more likely to get a UTI if they use spermicides or a diaphragm for contraception.

- **People with a urinary catheter** – a catheter is a tube inserted through the urethra into the bladder to drain urine (e.g. after surgery).

- **Elderly people** – especially if they have bladder or bowel problems.

- **People with diabetes** – can be less able to resist infection. Also, bacteria grow more easily in urine with a high sugar content.

- **Men with prostate problems** – may have trouble with urine flow.

- **Babies and young children** – especially those born with a defect in their urinary tract.

### Treatment

**Urinary alkalinisers** *(e.g. Ural, Citravescent)*

Urinary alkalinisers make urine less acidic. This reduces the stinging or burning feeling caused by passing urine. Ask a pharmacist for advice.

**Antibiotics**

UTIs usually need to be treated with prescription antibiotics. The doctor or nurse may ask you for a urine sample to help decide on the best antibiotic. You can also help to clear cystitis by:

- drinking plenty of fluid, especially water, to flush bacteria out of the urinary tract
- emptying your bladder completely when urinating.

### Recurring UTIs

People who often get UTIs may benefit from treatment to prevent infection. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.
**Self care**

Self-care strategies that may reduce the risk of getting UTIs include:

- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine ‘light-coloured’ (unless a doctor advises you not to).
- Urinate when you feel the urge, rather than holding on.
- Empty your bladder completely when urinating.

**For women also:**

- Wipe from front to back (urethra to anus) after passing urine or emptying your bowels.
- Empty your bladder soon after sex.
- Wash your genital area every day.
- Avoid vaginal douching.
- Avoid tight or synthetic underwear.
- Treat vaginal infections quickly.

**Important**

A UTI can be serious. Get medical attention straight away if:

- your symptoms do not go within 7 days, or return soon after treatment
- you have symptoms of a kidney infection (fever, chills, back pain, nausea or vomiting)
- you are pregnant
- you have diabetes or a weakened immune system
- a child has signs or symptoms of a UTI.
Related Fact Cards

- Antibiotics
- Bladder and urine control
- Menopause
- Prostate problems

For more information

Kidney Health Australia
Phone: 1800 454 363
Website: www.kidney.org.au

Healthdirect Australia
Phone: 1800 022 222
Website: www.healthdirect.gov.au

NPS MedicineWise
Medicines Line
Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)
Website: www.nps.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)
Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

Poisons Information Centre
In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.