UTI: This common infection can be serious

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A [urinary tract infection](#) (UTI) is common, but it can be serious.

"Simple urinary tract infections can be managed by your primary care provider, but when they become complex leading to other issues or problems, you should seek the care of a specialist," says Dr. Mitchell

Humphreys, a urologist at Mayo Clinic.

What is a UTI?

The urinary system helps the body eliminate waste, excess water and salt. It encompasses the kidneys, ureters, bladder and urethra. Bacteria can enter any part of the system, causing an infection.

What are UTI symptoms?

A UTI may cause symptoms but not always. Common symptoms are:

- A strong urge to urinate. Even after using the toilet, that sensation "to go" may not go away.
- A burning or discomfort sensation while passing urine.
- Urinating often, passing small amounts of urine.
- Blood in the urine. Blood in the urine may be red, but it may look pink or brown.
- Cloudy-looking or strong-smelling urine.
- Pelvic pain. Women, in particular, may feel pain and pressure around the pubic bone.

Symptoms also may depend on which part of the urinary tract is affected. If you're feeling back or side pain, that may be from a kidney infection. If pain is in the lower belly, a bladder infection may be the culprit.

Especially in older adults, one effect of a UTI can be delirium, or feeling increased confusion.

What are risk factors for a UTI?

"Typically, our immune systems are great at combating and preventing UTIs, but there are several situations and certain individuals that may be more prone to UTIs," Dr. Humphreys says.

- Female anatomy: Women have greater risk of UTIs. Because a woman's urethra is shorter than a man's, bacteria can more easily enter the urinary system. Menopause also increases the risk of UTIs in women.
- Sexual activity: UTIs are not sexually transmitted infections, but sexual activity increases the risk for UTIs. Intercourse can cause bacteria to enter the urethra.
- Some birth control methods: Diaphragms and spermicide, for example, increase the risk for UTIs.
- Catheter use: Catheters may be used by people in the hospital or by those who are paralyzed or have other neurological problems that make it difficult to urinate.

"A catheter is a foreign body and can serve as a highway to allow bacteria to have access to the bladder," Dr. Humphreys says.

- Recent urinary procedure: Urinary surgery or an exam with medical instruments can increase UTI risk.
- Other health concerns: People born with urinary tract problems or those who have kidney stones, prostate issues, or suppressed immune systems are at increased risk of UTIs.

With prompt treatment, UTIs rarely cause complications. But without proper treatment, UTIs can be serious. Complications may include permanent kidney damage or sepsis, which can be potentially life-threatening.

What are UTI treatments?

UTIs typically are treated with antibiotics. Be sure to take the medication as directed.

What helps prevent UTIs?

- Drink plenty of liquids. Water consumption dilutes urine, leads to urinating more frequently and flushes bacteria.
- Wipe from front back. After urinating or having a bowel movement, wipe from front to back to help prevent spread of bacteria.
- Urinate soon after sex.
- Avoid potentially irritating products. Using deodorant sprays or powders in the genital area may irritate the urethra.
- Switch birth control. Consider birth control methods other than a diaphragm or spermicide, for example, which can contribute to bacterial growth.

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