

## Cystitis

### Overview

Cystitis is an infection and/or inflammation of the lining of the bladder. The term is used to describe a range of infections and irritations in the lower urinary system<sup>1</sup>. If cystitis is due to infection by germs/bacteria, it is called bacterial cystitis; if it is due to an inflammation only, it is called non-bacterial cystitis<sup>2</sup>.

### Causes

A bacterial infection is the most common cause of cystitis<sup>3</sup>. Women get cystitis more than men because the female urethra is shorter and nearer the opening of the anus, making it easier for bacteria to be transferred from the anus across the perineal area and into the urethra. The bacteria then travels up towards the bladder, causing infection and irritation.

### Causes of Bacterial Cystitis

You are more likely to get cystitis if you:

- Are sexually active and having intercourse frequently and/or vigorously
- Use spermicidal gels on condoms, caps, diaphragms, and sponges
- Are pregnant, as body changes can make you prone to urinary infections
- Have been through the menopause and experience vaginal dryness causing soreness and irritation during sexual intercourse
- Don't drink enough water, as this can allow the bladder and urethra to become dry which can lead to crystals of uric acid forming and irritating the delicate tissue<sup>2</sup>
- Have a urinary catheter, which can introduce bacteria into your bladder
- Are elderly and less mobile or have difficulty emptying your bladder
- Have a condition that prevents you from emptying your bladder such as bladder or kidney stones
- Have diabetes, as your urine may contain more sugar, which encourages bacteria to grow
- Insert tampons, which may be carrying bacteria or transfer bacteria from the surface into the vagina
- Wipe or wash your bottom from back to front as this can transfer bacteria to and from the anus to the urethra, which can then reach the bladder.

## Non-Bacterial Cystitis causes

There are four headings under which most attacks or symptoms of Non-Bacterial Cystitis occur. They are:

**Dehydration:** Not maintaining a sufficient intake of water-based liquids allows the bladder and urethra to become dry which can lead to crystals of uric acid forming and irritating the delicate tissue.

**Irritation:** Can occur due to allergic responses to different foods and drinks. Holding on instead of emptying the bladder when needed may also cause irritation.

**Toiletries:** Certain soaps, powders, deodorants, antiseptics, shower gels, contraceptive gels, sponges or condoms and a host of other chemicals coming into contact with the urethral opening can all cause a bladder inflammation.

**Tight clothing:** Jeans with their tight knot of seam which can bruise the urethral opening; clothes which restrict air access such as tight trousers, leotards, tights and body stockings, and swim-suits full of salt and sand can all be a source of irritation.

## Symptoms

Most common symptoms are:

- Twinging pain at the urethral opening
- Sharp, burning, stinging sensations during urination
- A frequent and strong urge to urinate, even though there's little urine to pass
- A sense of not emptying your bladder fully

Other symptoms of cystitis may include:

- Abdominal pain or backache
- Blood in urine
- Strong smelling urine
- Cloudy or dark urine
- Fever, temperature and weakness

In you experience any of these secondary symptoms, see your GP or genito-urinary clinic, as these symptoms may indicate other bladder infections or a sexually transmitted infection such as chlamydia<sup>4</sup>.

## Prevention

Drinking plenty of water-based fluids is often advised to help prevent cystitis. Drinking cranberry juice is also thought to be a good preventative measure, as cranberries contain proanthocyanidins

(PACs) that can prevent the adhesion of certain bacteria associated with urinary tract infections to the urinary tract wall (Ref 10, 11 & 12 below). However there is no definite evidence that this is the case<sup>5</sup>.

Good personal hygiene is particularly important in order to help prevent bacteria travelling from the anus to the urethra:

- After a bowel movement or passing urine, always remember to wipe from front to back, to avoid transmitting bacteria from the anus to vulva
- However, go gently as too much cleansing or scrubbing may damage the genital skin, allowing bacteria to thrive<sup>6</sup>
- Before and after having sex, make sure you are clean but avoid using perfumed toiletries around your genital area<sup>3</sup>
- Emptying your bladder as soon as possible after having sex may also help to flush out any bacteria which may have entered the urethra
- When you need to go to the toilet, don't delay going. Empty your bladder fully every time.

If you have recurrent cystitis, it's also worth switching your underwear to cotton (which allows the skin to breathe) and also avoiding tight jeans and trousers, which can create warm, moist, airless conditions in which some bacteria thrive<sup>6</sup>.

## **Treatment**

Not all cases of cystitis require a visit to the doctor. In many cases, you can relieve the symptoms by purchasing a product containing potassium citrate or sodium citrate powder which mixes with water to make a drink. These oral treatments, available over-the-counter in pharmacies and supermarkets, can offer relief within a few hours. They work by counteracting the acidity of the urine, thus relieving the intense stinging pain experienced by cystitis sufferers when passing water and reducing the urge to pass water so frequently<sup>7</sup>.

An at home remedy that has a similar effect is to drink a glass of water into which is dissolved half a teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda. It may also help to drink water, at frequent intervals, to assist in flushing out the infection<sup>4</sup>.

## **When to see your doctor<sup>3</sup>**

Mild cystitis usually goes away within two to four days. However, if it continues, you should see your GP, who may give you a short course of antibiotics. If symptoms don't improve you should go back to your GP promptly, who may arrange tests to rule out other causes or to identify the bacteria causing the cystitis.

If you get cystitis more than three times a year, it's important to see your GP to check that you're not suffering from another condition that you've mistaken for cystitis.

You should also see your GP if you have cystitis symptoms and you are also:

- Under 18
- Male
- Diabetic
- Over 65
- Pregnant or breast-feeding
- On a low salt diet

Or if you have:

- Recurring symptoms
- Blood in your urine
- Severe abdominal pain or pain in your lower back
- A high temperature,
- Nausea or vomiting
- Kidney or heart disease
- High blood pressure

## Interstitial Cystitis

Interstitial Cystitis is a chronic condition in which the bladder wall becomes inflamed, causing all the symptoms of an infection, including pain and an urgent need to pass urine frequently. However, these symptoms will have usually been present for nine months before interstitial cystitis is diagnosed.

The cause of Interstitial Cystitis is unknown. Although it may begin with an infection, it is not thought to be caused by bacteria. While the symptoms may improve after a few months, they can go on for years and, as yet, there is no cure.

However as with all bladder infections, if symptoms persist, it is recommended that you visit your GP to discuss your concerns. For more information about Interstitial Cystitis, visit [www.cobfoundation.org](http://www.cobfoundation.org)<sup>9</sup>.

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A wide range of women's health resources are available at [www.healthywomen.org.uk](http://www.healthywomen.org.uk)

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