Urinary Tract Infections
A guide to understanding your condition

What is a UTI?
A urinary tract infection (or UTI) is a common infection of the urinary tract, usually caused by problem bacteria. UTIs occur frequently, especially in women where they are the second most experienced infection after the common cold.

UTIs are usually categorised by where they occur in the urinary system.

Kidneys and ureters
Kidneys and ureters are referred to as the upper urinary tract. Your kidneys have a number of functions and one of these is to control the amount of fluid in the body. They also filter out waste products to form urine. Urine produced by the kidneys then flows to the bladder via ureters.

Infection occurring in the kidneys is called pyelonephritis. This can be very serious and requires prompt medical treatment.

Urethra and bladder
The urethra and bladder are referred to as the lower urinary tract. Your bladder fills with the urine created by your kidneys and empties it via the urethra when you urinate.

If infection occurs in the urethra – it is called urethritis.
If it occurs in the bladder, it’s called cystitis.

Cystitis, which literally means inflammation of the bladder, is the most frequently experienced UTI. Suffering from cystitis is incredibly common – especially in women with one in two women experiencing at least one UTI in their lifetime.

For men, the incidence is lower, but it’s still common. Around one in 20 men will experience a UTI in their lifetime – most commonly in their older years, especially in the presence of lower urinary tract dysfunction.

What causes UTIs?

More than 75% of UTI cases are caused by the E.coli bacteria. These bacteria commonly reside harmlessly as part of your bowel flora and usually enter the urinary tract via the urethra from the perineal and perianal areas.

When bacteria enter the lower urinary tract, they can multiply leading to the bladder lining and urinary tract tissues becoming inflamed.

Infected urine is usually acidic. So acidic urine coming into contact with inflamed urinary tract tissue explains why it can sting / burn to pass urine.

If a lower urinary tract infection is not treated in a timely manner, the infection can travel from the bladder to the ureters and kidneys – causing a more serious infection.

UTIs cannot be passed from person to person.
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The symptoms of UTIs
Symptoms you might experience can vary and range from mild to severe. Common symptoms of UTIs, including cystitis, can include:

- a sensation of needing to urinate more frequently
- a feeling that the bladder is still full after urinating
- pain ranging from a prickle to more severe burning pain on urination which has been described like passing broken glass
- urine that looks / smells different or abnormal.

The following symptoms may also be experienced with cystitis, but sometimes these are signs of more severe upper UTIs e.g. those associated with the kidneys.

- lower abdominal or back pain
- blood in the urine
- fever or chills.

Diagnosing a UTI
Your doctor may diagnose a UTI based on symptoms and they may also do further tests such as a urine dipstick or take a urine sample for laboratory testing.

Treatment of a UTI
Early treatment of UTIs with antibiotics can prevent the infection from worsening, hence it’s important to seek medical help as soon as you notice symptoms.

UTIs including cystitis, usually respond quickly and well to a range of antibiotics and your doctor may prescribe these for you. Follow the instructions of your doctor. Usually antibiotics are taken as a short course over 3 to 5 days.

Taking a urinary alkaliniser in addition to your antibiotics can help alleviate the burning symptoms associated with a lower UTI such as cystitis.

Preventing UTIs in the future?

- Drink plenty of water to 'flush' your urinary tract.
- Wash before any sexual activity and suggest your partner does too
- Urinate immediately after sexual activity
- Avoid using spermicides, including spermicidal condoms
- Avoid using vaginal deodorants / sprays
- After going to the toilet, always wipe front to back
- Wear cotton underwear and if wearing pantyhose, choose those with a cotton gusset

This factsheet has been produced by Aspen Australia and is of a general nature only. It does not replace any advice provided by your doctor. If you have any questions about your condition or its treatment, please speak to your healthcare professional.

Brought to you by Aspen Pharma Pty Ltd, 34-36 Chandos St, St Leonards NSW 2065.