Intermountain® Healthcare

Urinary Tract Infection (UTI)

What is a urinary tract infection — and what causes it?

A **urinary tract infection (UTI)** is an infection in any part of the urinary tract. The urinary tract includes the:

- Kidneys — two organs that filter blood and make urine
- Ureters — the tubes that carry urine from the kidneys to the bladder
- Bladder — where urine is stored
- Urethra — the tube that carries urine from the bladder to the outside of your body

The most common type of UTI is a **bladder infection.** It's caused by bacteria (germs) getting into the urethra and traveling up to the bladder. Bladder infections are not serious if treated quickly.

A **kidney infection** happens when the germs travel from the bladder all the way up the ureters to the kidneys. These can be more serious and cause permanent damage.

What are the symptoms?

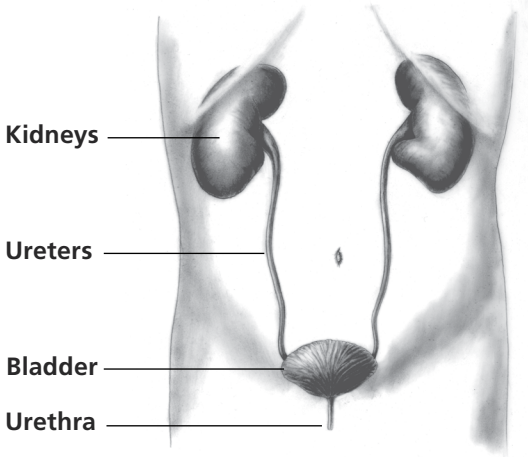
Your symptoms may depend on the location of your UTI. It's possible to have infection in more than one area of your urinary tract. For example, you could have both a bladder infection and a kidney infection.

Bladder infections don't always have symptoms, but when they do, symptoms can include:

- Pain or burning when you urinate (pee)
- Feeling the need to urinate often
- Cloudy or bloody urine with a strong odor
- Cramping in the lower abdomen (belly) or back

Symptoms of a kidney infection can include:

- Chills and shaking, or fever over 100°F
- Nausea or vomiting
- Pain in the side, back, groin, or abdomen



The Urinary Tract

How do I know if I have a UTI?

If you think you may have a UTI, contact your healthcare provider. They can do a urine test to see if a UTI is causing your symptoms. They may also do blood tests or imaging tests to diagnose similar problems.

What are the risk factors?

Several things can give you a greater chance of getting a UTI, like:

- Being female (although men can get them too)
- Problems emptying your bladder completely
- Older age, especially in people with memory problems
- Diabetes
- Having sex often, or having a new sex partner
- Using certain types of birth control like a diaphragm or a spermicide
- Menopause
- Diarrhea or inability to control bowl movements
- Kidney stones or other health problems that affect the flow of urine
- Long-term constipation or when urine gets backed up (in children)

How is a UTI treated?

Your UTI may be treated in one or more of these ways:

- **Antibiotics.** Most UTIs are treated with antibiotic medicines. These stop the germs that caused the infection. Your symptoms may start to improve the day after you start taking antibiotics. Even if you feel better, **be sure to keep taking your antibiotics as recommended until all the pills are gone.** If you don't, the infection could come back and be harder to treat.
- **Drink extra fluids.** Some doctors may recommend that you drink extra fluids to help flush germs from the bladder.
- **Other treatments.** Your doctor may recommend other treatments based on your particular condition. If your symptoms are severe, or if you are pregnant, you may need to be treated in a hospital.

What if a UTI isn't treated?

When treated quickly, UTIs rarely cause problems. If it isn't treated, a UTI can lead to:

- More UTIs in the future
- Permanent kidney damage
- A pregnant woman giving birth too early or having a baby that doesn't weigh enough

What if I have a lot of UTIs?

If you get UTIs often, talk with your doctor. Your doctor may want to do other tests to see if something else is causing your symptoms. Your doctor may recommend that you keep taking antibiotics just to make sure any small amount of germs is treated.

How can I prevent UTIs?

If you keep getting UTIs, these things may help you get them less often:

- ☐ **Wipe from front to back after using the bathroom.** This will help prevent germs near your anus from getting close to your vagina and urethra.
- ☐ **Drink plenty of water.** It will make you urinate more often and help flush out germs. Limit drinks that can irritate the bladder, like those that contain alcohol or caffeine.
- ☐ **Keep your genital area clean.** Take showers instead of baths. Clean your genital area and anal area before and after sex.
- ☐ **Urinate right after sex.** It might help flush out germs that get into the bladder during sex.
- ☐ **Use a different kind of birth control.** Some women find that spermicides — especially when used with a diaphragm — cause bladder infections more often.
- ☐ **If you have been through menopause, ask your healthcare provider about vaginal estrogen.** Vaginal estrogen is a cream that can be put into your vagina to help prevent infections.

CALL YOUR DOCTOR

When should I call my doctor?

- **Contact your healthcare provider if:**
  - You have symptoms of a UTI
  - You have recently been treated for a UTI and your symptoms return
- **Call right away if your symptoms include:**
  - Back or side pain
  - Chills
  - Fever
  - Vomiting

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