

FULL DISCLOSURE

Thorough and Quality Communication Improves Care for Patients with Gonorrhea

By Cathy Cassata

A health care visit often comes with a certain amount of unease, especially for patients who are seeking gynecological care. Add in concerns about a sexually transmitted infection (STI), and the level of anxiety, worry, and embarrassment is compounded. However, medical assistants can help patients feel comfortable and understood before they see the physician.

“Sometimes the patient is more open with me about why they are here,” says Heather Hudgins, CMA (AAMA), who works at Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist Obstetrics and Gynecology in High Point, North Carolina. “When this happens, I’ll tell the provider, ‘I was talking with the patient and she says she is here for vaginal discharge, but she told me her partner told her that he tested positive for gonorrhea.’” This allows

the provider to enter the examination room prepared to address the situation.

Tell Me More

Gonorrhea is a bacterial infection that is spread through sexual fluids and can cause infection in the genitals, rectum, and throat. In 2022, more than 2.5 million cases of chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis were reported in the United States, with gonorrhea making up almost 650,000 of those cases.¹

“[There] is a concern that an equal number may have it, but without symptoms they have not been diagnosed,” says Estrelita Dixon, MD, division chief of general internal medicine at UC Health and professor at the University of Cincinnati.

While gonorrhea is very common in people between the ages of 15 and 24, the STI can affect anyone at any age.²

“Sexually active people of any age can contract gonorrhea and transmit it to their partners. It can also be passed on to children during childbirth,” says Tochi Iroku-Malize, MD, 2021–2022 president of the American Academy of Family Physicians.

The majority of people who have gonorrhea do not have symptoms. When present, symptoms most likely occur within two weeks of infection. Further, symptoms usually occur in men, with a large amount of penile discharge and painful urination, notes Dixon. “Sometimes there can be testicular pain,” she adds.

For women and people with vaginas, symptoms can present as white, green, yellow, or bloody discharge from the vagina, pain when urinating, bleeding between periods, heavy bleeding during a period, or a fever, explains Dr. Iroku-Malize. “Additionally,

Prevention Pointers

The following can help people prevent STIs and lower their risk for gonorrhea⁴:

- Using condoms consistently and correctly
- Practicing open and honest communication with partners about each other's history of STIs and previous testing for STIs
- Applying antibiotic eye ointment on newborns to prevent gonococcal eye infection

both women and men can get sore throats if they've had oral contact with an infected person," she says.

Men and women who have rectal infections and show symptoms might experience the following²:

- Discharge
- Anal itching
- Soreness
- Bleeding

What's Next

Testing for gonorrhea can be done with a urine sample; by using a swab to take cell samples from the throat, genitals, or rectum; or by swabbing discharge from any infected area. Some types of gonorrhea tests can be done with an at-home STI test kit. "The kit includes a container for collecting a urine sample to send to a laboratory for testing," says Dr. Iroku-Malize.

When patients, concerned that they have been exposed to an STI, go to the clinic where Hudgins works, the physician will run the test to confirm whether they were exposed, "but [the physician] will also go ahead and treat them while we are waiting for results, to be on the safe side," she says.

Gonorrhea is curable with antibiotics. Depending on the strain, one pill might be prescribed, or a patient may need to take medication for seven days. Because an increased rate of antibiotic resistance is occurring worldwide and some strains of gonorrhea are resistant to antibiotics, the physician may prescribe two kinds of antibiotics in shot and pill form.³

"While it might be nerve-racking or

scary to get diagnosed with gonorrhea, it is easily treated with antibiotics," says Dr. Iroku-Malize. "However, I encourage patients to get it treated immediately, because if it's left untreated, it could cause some serious health problems."

Complications from untreated gonorrhea include the following⁴:

- Pelvic inflammatory disease
- Chronic pain
- Infertility
- Ectopic pregnancy
- Increased risk of getting or spreading HIV

In severe instances, untreated gonorrhea can spread to the blood, skin, heart, or joints, causing major complications and death.

Know What to Say

Receiving a diagnosis of an STI like gonorrhea can make people feel hurt or betrayed by their partner, or ashamed of themselves. "These feelings are completely normal," says Dr. Iroku-Malize. Medical staff can help patients navigate emotions, in addition to treatment options, in a safe place, she adds.

When a patient tests positive for an STI, Hudgins calls them to inform them of the diagnosis and to relay the physician's treatment plan. "Some of the patients are repeat, so they already know they are positive, and some aren't surprised because they did question the possible exposure. But others are really taken back and not sure how they were exposed," she says.

For those patients, Hudgins examines their chart and tells them the date they

last tested negative. Then she explains that from that date to now, any partner they engaged in sexual relations with could be who they contracted the STI from.

With 22 years of experience in OB-GYN, she trains new medical assistants on various practices of the office. When it comes to training them on STIs, she teaches them how to talk to patients.

"I tell them to remind patients, 'it's important that you and your partner treat this and make sure you are not having intercourse until you come back in so you do not spread infection. Also, if the infection is left untreated, it could cause other issues like pelvic inflammatory disease or infertility,'" Hudgins says. "We can make sure the physician's message gets across in an informative and compassionate way."

While STIs can be a difficult topic, medical assistants are well positioned to offer a safe space for patients to openly discuss their fears and concerns. Equipped with a knowledge of gonorrhea and unwavering compassion, each medical assistant can improve patients' experiences by making sure their medical visits go smoothly and helping patients receive necessary follow-up treatments as prescribed by the patient's physician. ♦

References

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