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Guarding against chlamydia

Chlamydia is a common sexually transmitted infection and affects millions of men and women around the world every year.

SEXUALLY transmitted diseases (STDs) are a topic most women prefer to avoid, but it is important to have this conversation because prevention or early treatment of STDs can keep many complications at bay.

Chlamydia is one of the common STDs that I see in women. Many of my patients tend to present with chlamydia at a late stage, when other complications related to the reproductive system have already developed.

My best advice for women is to prevent infection, as treatment may sometimes come too late.

In this article, we will take a look at the consequences of untreated chlamydia infection and how women can safeguard themselves from contracting STDs.

A silent disease

Chlamydia trachomatis is a bacteria that is spread through sexual contact. It is a common infection and affects millions of men and women around the world every year.

The bacterium resides in the cervix and urethra of a woman's body, hence causing infection in those parts. The infection can also spread to the reproductive organs. In other circumstances, chlamydia may also be found in the throat or the rectum.

Chlamydia is a type of STD (or STI, sexually transmitted infection). Like other STDs, such as gonorrhoea, herpes and syphilis, chlamydia is not only transmitted through sexual intercourse (vaginal or anal), but also through other means of sexual contact, including kissing, oral sex, and use of sexual toys like vibrators.

A woman can also pass the infection to her newborn baby during delivery.

In most cases of chlamydia infection among men and women, there are no symptoms.

Some women may experience infection of the uterine cervix (cervicitis), which could cause abnormal vaginal discharge (from the penis, in men) and abdominal pain. But in some instances, cervicitis can also produce no symptoms.

The lack of symptoms is the reason chlamydia is known as a "silent" disease. Many affected men and women unknow-

ingly transmit the infection to their partners because they do not take precautions.

Complicated consequences

Chlamydia is associated with a number of serious problems, especially among women.

The infection of the cervix that I mentioned above can also spread to the urethra (called urethritis). This will cause symptoms similar to urinary tract infection, such as pain during urination and a frequent/urgent need to urinate.

Left untreated, chlamydia infection can cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), which occurs in about 30% of women with chlamydia.

PID causes symptoms like fever, pelvic cramping, abdominal pain and pain during sexual intercourse. As it becomes more severe, it can cause difficulties for women trying to conceive, and may even lead to sterility.

Chlamydia can also destroy the Fallopian tubes, causing infertility or tubal pregnancies.

If a pregnant mother transmits chlamydia to her baby during childbirth, there are a lot of risks to the baby. It can cause serious eye damage that could lead to blindness, or pneumonia, which can be deadly to a newborn.

As you can see, there is every need to ensure that chlamydia infection is treated early, or better yet, prevented.

Diagnosis and treatment

Since chlamydia infects a person without noticeable symptoms, the only way to detect it is by going for annual testing, especially if you are sexually active.

There are several types of tests to diagnose chlamydia, but the most common ones use a urine sample or a swab from the cervix or urethra.

As chlamydia is a type of bacteria, it is treated with antibiotics, such as azithromycin (Zithromax, Zmax) or doxycycline (Vibramycin, Oracea, Adoxa or Atridox). Azithromycin tends to be more expensive, as it delivers the antibiotic in a single, convenient dose. The other types of antibiotics are

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taken twice a day for seven days.

Fortunately, chlamydia has not developed any resistance to current antibiotics, unlike gonorrhoea. Treatment is generally effective in more than 95% of patients, although it will not have any effect on damage that has been caused by the infection before treatment.

If you are diagnosed with chlamydia, you should also inform your sexual partner(s) as they will need to be treated as well. It is pointless if you receive treatment and your partner doesn't, as he will re-transmit the infection to you again.

You cannot develop immunity against chlamydia, so if you continue to be sexually active with different partners, you could be at risk of contracting the infection again.

Preventing chlamydia

Condoms are the most common way to protect against STDs. Latex and polyurethane condoms can decrease the spread of chlamydia and gonorrhoea, but do not totally prevent them. They also do not fully protect against other STDs, such as genital herpes, genital warts, syphilis and HIV.

The only way to have proper safe sex is to have one partner who only has sex with you. Do not have more than one partner at a time. Minimising the number of sexual

partners means that you are less exposed to the diseases that they or their other partners may have.

Can you totally trust a new potential partner? The only way to answer that question is to ask him to test for STDs before entering into a sexual relationship with him.

Prevention of chlamydia is easier and more beneficial than treating it. Therefore, the best way to protect yourself is to get tested every year, as well as practise safe and responsible sex.

■ *Datuk Dr Nor Ashikin Mokhtar is a consultant obstetrician & gynaecologist (FRCOG, UK). For further information, visit www.primanora.com. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only and it should not be construed as personal medical advice. Information published in this article is not intended to replace, supplant or augment a consultation with a health professional regarding the reader's own medical care. The Star does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this column. The Star disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.*



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