

Urethritis

What is urethritis?

Urethritis is irritation or infection of the urethra. The urethra is the tube that empties urine from the bladder. In men the urethra extends the full length of the penis. A woman's urethra is short (about 1 and 1/2 inches long). Its opening is just above the vagina and not far from the anus (rectal area). This means it is easy for bacteria to enter a woman's urethra from these areas.

What is the cause?

Urethritis may be caused by infection. Sexually transmitted disease (STD), such as chlamydia or gonorrhea, is a common cause in men and women. Yeast infection may also cause it.

In men irritation of the urethra can be caused by chemicals, such as lubricants, spermicide, or additives to condoms (colors, flavors, etc.).

In women urethritis may be caused by an irritation. For example, rubbing or pressure on the genital area from tight clothing or sex can cause urethritis. It can also be caused by physical activity such as bicycle riding. Irritants such as soap, body powder, and spermicides are other possible causes.

In most older women, the tissues of the urethra and bladder become thinner and drier after menopause. This is caused by the lack of the female hormone estrogen. It is the usual cause of urethritis in older women.

What are the symptoms?

In men, common symptoms are:

- Painful urination
- Discharge from the urethra (drops of pus at the opening of the penis)
- Tenderness at the opening of the urethra

In women the symptoms are similar to the symptoms of a bladder infection and include:

- Pain when you urinate
- Feeling the need to urinate often
- A feeling that the bladder is never empty
- Pain during sex

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms, possible irritants you may be using, and your recent sexual history.

If you are a man, discharge from the penis may be tested in the lab. The tests will look for infection with a sexually transmitted disease. If tests don't find an STD,

your provider may conclude that you have nonspecific urethritis (NSU). Several types of bacteria are associated with NSU, but it is not easy to test for them.

In women it can be harder to find what is causing the symptoms. Urethritis almost never causes a discharge from a woman's urethra. Sometimes the urethra is red or swollen. Your healthcare provider will examine the urethra and area around it. Your provider may look for drying and thinning of tissues. Your provider may swab the urethral area and cervix to test for bacteria in the lab. A sample of your urine may be tested for infection.

How is it treated?

Your healthcare provider will prescribe antibiotics if your symptoms are caused by an STD or other infection. Your sexual partner should also be treated. Your provider may prescribe another medicine to help relieve burning with urination and discomfort in the bladder.

If you are an older woman and the problem seems to be caused by tissue thinning and dryness, it may be treated with an estrogen cream.

How long will the effects last?

Symptoms caused by an infection should stop within a few days after you start taking antibiotics. A woman starting to take estrogen for postmenopausal tissue changes may feel some relief from her symptoms after several days or weeks.

Men who have nonspecific urethritis may keep having a small amount of discharge from the urethra for some time after treatment. The discharge may be clear to slightly cloudy in color, but there should be no discomfort. If you keep having discomfort after you finish your antibiotics, tell your healthcare provider.

How can I help take care of myself?

- Follow your healthcare provider's instructions. Take all medicine exactly as it is prescribed.
- If you have an STD, do not have sex before both you and your partner have finished all of the medicine and your provider says it's OK.
- Ask your provider:
 - How and when you will hear your test results
 - How long it will take to recover
 - What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
 - How to take care of yourself at home
 - What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them
- Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup.

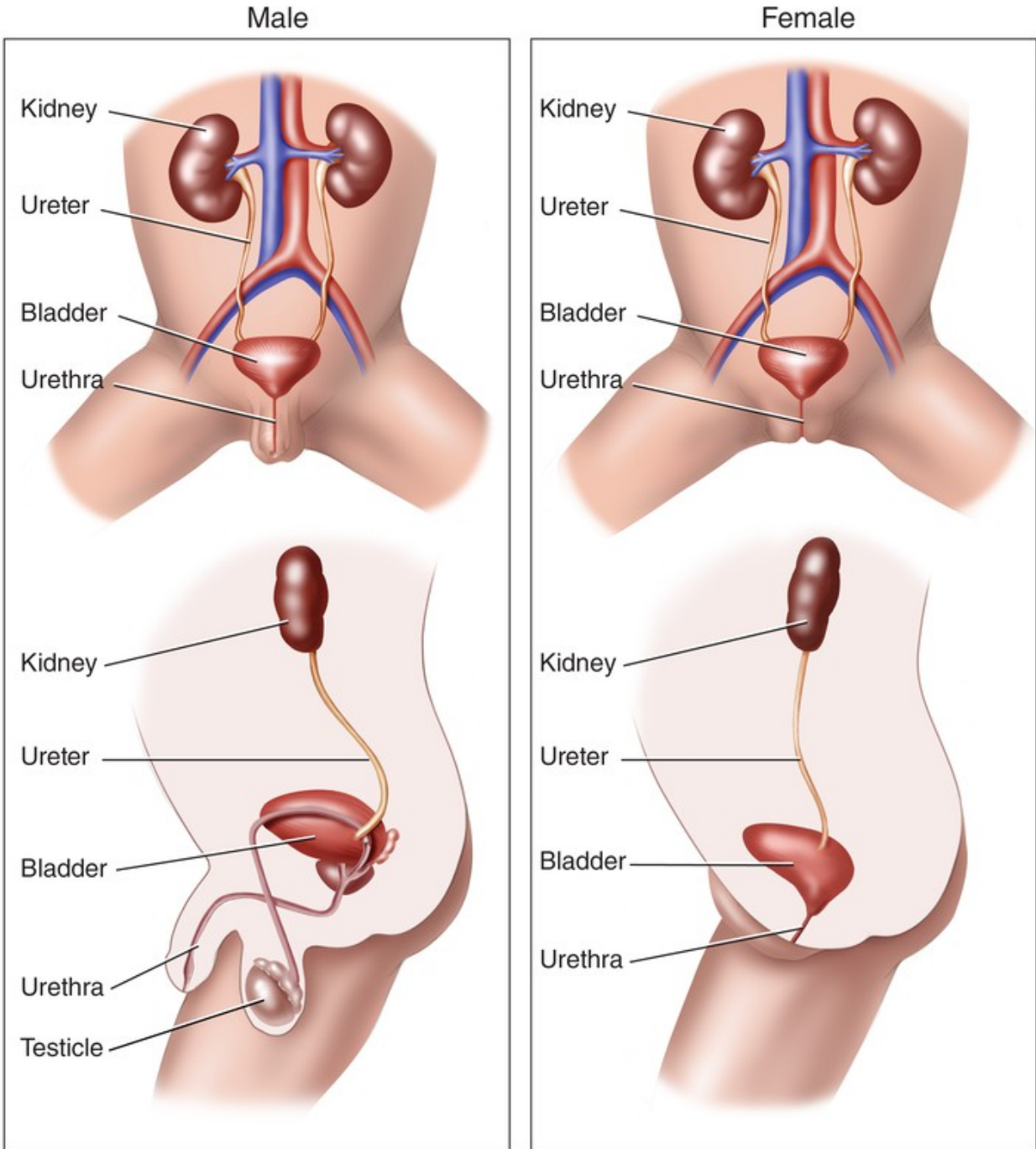
How can I help prevent urethritis?

- If you are a woman:
 - Avoid tight clothes in the genital area, such as control-top pantyhose and tight jeans. Take wet bathing suits off right away.
 - Don't use irritating cosmetics or chemicals in the area of the vagina and urethra. This includes, for example, strong soaps, feminine hygiene sprays or douches, and scented napkins or panty liners.
 - Keep the vaginal area clean. Wipe from front to back after using the toilet. Be sure to wash the genital area gently each time you bathe or shower. However, use only mild, unscented soap.
 - Wear underwear that is all cotton or has a cotton crotch. Pantyhose should also have a cotton crotch. Cotton allows better air circulation than nylon. Change underwear and pantyhose every day.
 - During pregnancy, tell your healthcare provider if you have a history of urinary tract problems. Your provider may order tests for bacteria in your urine to catch an infection before you have symptoms.
- Older women may consider using estrogen vaginal cream to help prevent tissue thinning and dryness.
- Avoid activities, chemicals, or other irritants that cause redness, burning, or itching in the genital area.
- Use latex or polyurethane condoms during sex to help prevent infection with an STD.
- Avoid any chemicals (including scents, colors, or flavors in condoms) before or during sex. Unscented lubricant, such as KY jelly, is OK.
- Have just 1 sexual partner who is not sexually active with anyone else. Make sure your partner has been tested for gonorrhea and other sexually transmitted diseases.

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Urinary System



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