Gonorrhea Encyclopedia Article

Gonorrhea

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Gonorrhea

Gonorrhea is among the most common **sexually transmitted diseases** (STD) and is also among the most common bacterial infections in adults. In the United States, between 2.5 and 3 million cases are reported each year, most occurring in people under age 30. In its early stages, gonorrhea may cause no symptoms and therefore, can be spread by unsuspecting victims. In females, gonorrhea often remains asymptomatic but can lead to vaginal itching, discharge, or uterine bleeding and other serious complications. An infected woman who gives birth can transmit the disease to her infant, often resulting in childhood blindness. As a precaution, silver nitrate is routinely administered to the eyes of newborns to prevent this condition. In males, gonorrhea causes infection of the urethra and painful urination. Though not deadly, the disease if untreated can infect other genital organs. If the infection spreads throughout the blood stream, it can cause an arthritis-dermatitis syndrome.

Gonorrhea was described in early writings from Egypt, China, and Japan. Warnings against "unclean discharge from the body" appear in the Bible. A diagnostic description of the disease was written in the Middle Ages. In the late fifteenth century, a **syphilis** epidemic raged throughout Europe, though at that time, syphilis was often confused with gonorrhea and some physicians assumed that gonorrhea was the first stage of syphilis. The gram-negative bacterium that causes gonorrhea was discovered in 1879 by Albert Neisser (1855-1916), a German physician who went on to identify the bacterial cause for **leprosy**. German immunologist **Paul Ehrlich** named the bacterium *Gonococcus.* Since then, five types of the *Gonococcus* organism have been identified.

A test for the presence of *Gonococcus* bacterium serves as the diagnostic tool. The first effective treatments for gonorrhea were the sulfonamides, which became available in 1937. During World War II, **penicillin** became widely available for the treatment of gonorrhea and other bacterial disease. However, while penicillin and related **antibiotics** are effective in about 90% of cases, some strains of the *Gonococcus* are becoming resistant to penicillin.