

What is a urinary tract infection?

When bacteria get into your bladder or kidneys and cause you to have symptoms, you have a urinary tract infection (UTI). It is important to know the difference between an infection and bacteriuria (having bacteria in the urine but no symptoms).

What causes urinary tract infections?

Because of your spinal cord injury and the fact that you must empty your bladder by intermittent catheterization, you are more likely than most people to get bacteria in your urine. The reason for this is that whenever a catheter is passed through the urethra (the channel between the bladder and the outside of the body) it can pick up bacteria that are normally on the skin and push the bacteria into the bladder. Bacteria can grow and multiply in the urine if the urine remains in the bladder for a prolonged amount of time (more than 4-6 hours). You can avoid this by emptying your bladder at least once every 6 hours and by drinking enough fluids to keep the urine volume between 300 and 400 cc (1 to 1-1/2 cup) at each catheterization. Careful hand washing before and after each catheterization is essential and will help prevent UTIs by decreasing the amount of bacteria on the skin.

Symptoms of a urinary tract infection (things you may feel)

- Fever
- Chills
- Leakage or voiding between catheterizations
- Increased spasms of legs, abdomen, or bladder
- Feeling the need to catheterize immediately (urgency)
- Feeling the need to catheterize more often (frequency)
- Burning of the urethra, penis, or pubic area
- Nausea
- Headache
- Mild low back pain or other aches
- Feeling “lousy” or tired

Signs of a urinary tract infection (things you may notice)

Sediment (gritty particles) or mucus in the urine or cloudy urine. Bad smelling urine (foul odor)
Blood in urine (pink or red urine) Note: The appearance and smell of your urine may change because of changes in your diet or fluid intake. If you have changes in the urine but no symptoms (see list above) you do not need to seek treatment for a UTI. People who empty their bladders by self-catheterization may occasionally see small blood clots or red blood visible on their catheters because of trauma (bumping against the bladder or urethra or forcing the catheter past the sphincter). This is not cause for worry unless it happens frequently. Larger amounts of blood, or urine that is red from blood, should always be reported to your health care provider.

Self care

Many people are able to prevent a UTI from developing by taking some self care steps. The most important step for people who do intermittent catheterization and begin to develop symptoms of a UTI is to catheterize themselves more frequently (every 2- 4 hours) and increase their fluid intake. Some people are able to avoid or treat UTIs by taking vitamin C (500-2,000 mg per day) or cranberry extract tablets. Other “natural” treatments may be helpful but you should consult with someone who is knowledgeable in this field, such as a naturopathic physician.

When to call your health care provider

If you develop a fever (temperature greater than 100 degrees) or if your symptoms are interfering with your life, you should call your health care provider. He or she will want to know your temperature, current symptoms, whether you have any allergies to antibiotics, and what antibiotics have worked well in the past. Your health care provider will want you to get a urine specimen for culture and will discuss with you whether antibiotics should be started right away or after the results of the culture are available.

How to collect a good specimen for urine culture

The accuracy of any urine test depends on careful collection of the specimen to avoid contamination by bacteria from other sources, such as your hands or the specimen container. Following the instructions below will help ensure accurate results.

1. Open your sterile jar—either one from the hospital or one you have prepared at home. (To sterilize a jar at home, choose a small jar with a snug-fitting lid. Wash it carefully in soap and water and rinse well. Place the jar and lid in a pan of boiling water and immerse for 10 minutes. Remove jar and lid with metal tongs, invert on a dish drainer, and allow to cool.) Do not touch the inside of the jar.
2. Using a new, sterile catheter, catheterize yourself as usual and allow some of the urine to flow into the jar. Collect at least 30 cc (1 oz.) of urine.