Urinary tract infection: a patient guide

A calm, Canadian-first overview of bladder infection, kidney infection, urine testing, recurrent UTI and safety-netting.

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General health information only. This guide does not diagnose a condition or replace an assessment by a qualified clinician.

What a UTI means

A urinary tract infection is a symptomatic infection of the urethra, bladder or kidneys. Cystitis usually means infection limited to the bladder. Pyelonephritis is a kidney infection and can be more serious. Bacteria in urine without compatible symptoms is called asymptomatic bacteriuria and is not the same as a UTI for most people.

Common symptoms

- Burning or pain when urinating
- Needing to urinate often or urgently
- Pressure or discomfort above the pubic bone
- Blood in the urine can occur
- Fever, chills, flank pain, nausea or vomiting suggest a higher-risk pattern

Symptoms are not the diagnosis

Vaginal or urethral irritation, sexually transmitted infection, stones, bladder pain syndrome, prostatitis, prostate enlargement, medication effects and dehydration can feel similar. A clinician decides whether a urine test or culture will help.

Testing and treatment discussions

- A history and focused examination may be enough to guide testing in some presentations.
- Urinalysis and culture are more important when symptoms are recurrent, complicated, systemic, occur in pregnancy or affect a child.
- Antibiotic choice depends on the suspected site, allergies, kidney function, prior cultures, local resistance and pregnancy.
- Do not use leftover antibiotics or someone else’s prescription.

Self-care while arranging advice

- Drink enough fluid to avoid dehydration; forcing large amounts is not necessary.
- Rest and use only symptom medicines that a clinician or pharmacist says are safe for you.

- Write down when symptoms began, changes, fever, flank pain, vomiting, blood and pregnancy possibility.

When to seek urgent help

- Fever or shaking chills, flank or back pain, vomiting, confusion, faintness, inability to pass urine, rapid worsening, pregnancy, an ill-appearing infant or concern for sepsis require prompt assessment.
- Call 911 for a medical emergency. In Ontario, call Health811 at 811 for non-emergency advice and navigation.

Sources

Canadian Urological Association recurrent UTI update: https://www.cua.org/sites/default/files/Professional-Development/GP%20SERIES/Update2024/rUTI_L.Campeau.pdf

Canadian Paediatric Society children's UTI stewardship statement: https://cps.ca/en/documents/position/management-urinary-tract-infections

HealthLink BC UTI in teenagers and adults: https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthwise/urinary-tract-infections-teenagers-and-adults

Public Health Ontario UTI Program: https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/Health-Topics/Antimicrobial-Stewardship/UTI-Program?tab=4

Choosing Wisely Canada pathology recommendations: https://choosingwiselycanada.org/recommendation/pathology/

Government of Canada urinary health guide: https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/benefits-military/health-support/women-diversity-health/health-guide/wdh-urinary-health-guide.html

Alberta Health Services recurrent UTI pathway: https://myhealth.alberta.ca/recurrent-uti-pathway/start-treatment-prevention-strategies

AUA/CUA/SUFU recurrent UTI guideline 2025: https://www.auanet.org/documents/Guidelines/PDF/2025%20Guidelines/rUTI%20Update/rUTI%202025%20Unabridged%20Final.pdf

CDC clinical overview of UTI: https://www.cdc.gov/uti/hcp/clinical-overview/

IDSA 2025 complicated UTI guideline: https://www.idsociety.org/~/link/bc125f1fa47a47b7913b884cd368e8a0.aspx

USPSTF asymptomatic bacteriuria recommendation: https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf/document/RecommendationStatementFinal/asymptomatic-bacteriuria-in-adults-screening

NICE lower UTI guideline NG109: https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng109

EAU Guidelines on Urological Infections: https://uroweb.org/guidelines/urological-infections

NHS urinary tract infections: https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/urinary-tract-infections-utis/

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