

Chlamydia trachomatis and Sexual Abuse

A Fact Sheet for Non-Medical Readers



INTRODUCTION

When a young child is found to have an infection caused by *Chlamydia trachomatis*, and the infection was not transmitted to the child during birth, sexual abuse should be assumed until proven otherwise. A medical child abuse expert should be consulted immediately to exclude an error in the diagnosis, exclude the possibility of non-sexual transmission, attempt to identify the timing of sexual contact and assist in the identification of possible perpetrators.

WHAT IS CHLAMYDIA?

- *Chlamydia trachomatis* is a bacterium that lives inside human cells.
- *Chlamydia trachomatis* is often referred to as Chlamydia or CT.
- *Chlamydia trachomatis* most commonly infects the human genital tract and rectum.

HOW COMMON IS CHLAMYDIA?

- Chlamydia is the most frequently reported sexually transmitted disease in the U.S., ~3 million infections annually.
- As many as one in 10 adolescent females test positive for Chlamydia.
- 2% - 13% of sexually abused children have Chlamydia infections.

HOW IS CHLAMYDIA TRANSMITTED?

- Chlamydia is transmitted primarily during anal or vaginal sex and occasionally through oral sex. Chlamydia can be transmitted even when the penis or tongue does not completely enter the vagina, mouth or rectum.
- Only a small amount of body fluid needs to be exchanged to transmit Chlamydia.
- Eye infections may result when discharge carries the disease into the eye during sex or hand-to-eye contact.
- Chlamydia can be passed from mother to newborn as the baby passes through the infected birth canal. 65% of infants who are born to mothers with Chlamydia will be infected. This may result in eye, throat, lung, rectal or vaginal infections. Infections of the vagina and rectum may cause no symptoms and can persist for many years.

HOW IS CHLAMYDIA NOT TRANSMITTED?

- Non-sexual transmission, other than during birth, is theoretically possible but has **NEVER** been documented to occur.
- Non-sexual transmission, other than during birth, is extremely unlikely because *Chlamydia trachomatis* only grows in warm and moist parts of the body. *Chlamydia trachomatis* dies quickly when it is dried or cooled. It cannot survive on exposed skin (e.g. hands or fingers) or on dry surfaces (e.g. countertops, bathtub surfaces or toilet seats.)
- Chlamydia only grows in human cells and is not transmitted by animals.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF CHLAMYDIA?

- 50% of males and 25% of women experience genital itching and burning with urination or discharge.
- Most infected individuals have no symptoms, but do transmit the infection to sexual partners.
- If symptoms develop, onset is usually within 7 - 21 days after exposure.
- Most pre-teen children, if infected, have no symptoms of illness.

HOW IS CHLAMYDIA DIAGNOSED?

- Almost no medical test is 100% specific, that is, not all positive tests are correct.
- When testing populations with a low prevalence of infection, there is an increased likelihood that a specific test will be a FALSE positive, i.e. the test will be positive even though the disease is not present.
- Many of the tests that work accurately in adult populations are unreliable when children are tested.
- A CULTURE for *Chlamydia trachomatis* is virtually 100% accurate.
- A culture for *Chlamydia trachomatis* is not 100% sensitive. Culture will fail to spot 10% - 30% of infections.
- Nucleic acid amplification tests are more sensitive than culture but the specificity of these tests in children is not known (i.e. these tests will miss fewer infections compared to culture, but might also report infection when none exists).
- Nucleic acid amplification tests will be positive for a short period of time even after an individual has been treated.
- Accurate diagnosis of Chlamydia in children requires an experienced laboratory and knowledgeable physician.

WHY ARE CHLAMYDIA INFECTIONS IN CHILDREN THOUGHT TO INDICATE SEXUAL ABUSE?

- Infections caused by *Chlamydia trachomatis* are highly indicative of sexual abuse in individuals who are not sexually active because transmission by non-sexual contact is so difficult.
 - *Chlamydia trachomatis* will only survive in moist, warm environments within the human body.
 - *Chlamydia trachomatis* dies when subjected to drying, to cold temperatures, or removal from a human cell.

- Transmission of Chlamydia during birth, from an infected mother to her newborn, occurs and may persist for years without causing symptoms. Birth transmission must be excluded when Chlamydia is diagnosed in young children.