

WOMEN'S  
HEALTH

By Dr Shilpa McQuillan,  
accredited menopause  
specialist, GP and  
community gynaecologist

# Bothersome Bladders

## Are antibiotics really the only solution to this burning issue?

**U**RINARY tract infections (UTIs) are one of the most common illnesses, with most women experiencing one at some point in their life.

It is important to not confuse common with trivial as this condition can have a massive impact on quality of life.

Not everyone or every UTI is the same with symptoms and episodes varying from person to person.

There are a lucky few who will experience a pretty straightforward episode needing no treatment. But for

most there is that all too familiar set of feelings: burning sensation during and after peeing, frequent urination with no relief, feeling feverish, nausea, dizziness, abdominal or back pain... the list goes on. These episodes can be hugely debilitating and painful, requiring urgent symptom relief. Quite frankly, it is impossible to think about anything else.

Most of us are accustomed to taking a one-off short course of antibiotics to resolve the issue. For some, repeated or long-term courses are needed for effective relief. But with increasing

awareness of complications such as antibiotic resistance and disruption to gut health, are antibiotics always the best and only answer? There are other treatments that may be right for you and improve your quality of life in the long term.

### KNOW YOUR TRIGGERS

Anyone can get a urine infection. They are most common in women because the urethra is short so there's less distance for bacteria to travel into the bladder.

Drinking plenty of fluids to empty your bladder at regular intervals can

‘These episodes can be hugely debilitating and painful, requiring urgent symptom relief. Quite frankly, it is impossible to think about anything else’



help flush away harmful bacteria which would otherwise travel into the bladder. Caffeine and alcohol are diuretics and can worsen dehydration, so it is advisable to drink them in moderation.

When peeing, it is good practice to wipe urine away from the urinary tract as the urethra is close to the anus, where there are lots of bacteria present.

Sexual activity, including foreplay and the use of sex toys, can increase the chance of bacterial transfer to the urinary tract, which is why urinating immediately after sex to flush away bacteria is good practice.

A common myth is that vaginal washing reduces the chance of infections but, in fact, the vagina is self-cleansing and excessive washing disrupts the carefully balanced acidic vaginal PH which is needed to ward off harmful germs, including those in the urinary tract, as it is so close to the vagina.

#### AVOID IRRITANTS

Common triggers include non-breathable tight underwear and pantyliners.

Beware of feminine hygiene products and vaginal moisturisers and lubricants as many of these contain artificial ingredients that can disrupt the genitourinary PH.

Many people are not aware that sugary foods and drinks can trigger UTIs.

When we consume high quantities of sugars, these pass into the bladder where they are broken down and provide an inviting environment for bacteria to live and multiply, increasing the risk of infections.

Although we want the vaginal PH to remain acidic to ward off harmful bacteria, acidity in the bladder caused by some foods and drinks can worsen the “burning” feeling many people experience with UTIs. They include fizzy drinks, caffeine, alcohol, spice and citrus.

Some people find that products such as cranberry juice and Effercitrate help by making the urine less acidic.

#### REDUCE STRESS

When we are stressed, we release stress hormones and inflammation markers to tell the body we are under threat and to attack.

If there is no external threat, the body attacks itself, including the urinary tract lining. If this lining is weakened, it is easy for bacteria to enter. Repetitive stress leads to chronic bladder

inflammation (cystitis). Having a healthy diet, plenty of sleep and good mental health can all help reduce chronic UTIs.

#### ADDRESS YOUR HORMONES

UTI rates rise steeply around perimenopause and menopause, which can happen as early as your thirties or forties.

This is due to a fluctuation and the eventual decline in oestrogen, which is needed to maintain healthy urinary and genital tract tissues. Oestrogen also maintains the “good” bacteria (such as Lactobacilli) that live in the vagina. These help fight infection-causing bacteria.

Many women benefit from using contraceptives or Hormone Replacement Therapy continuously to reduce fluctuating hormone levels, which may trigger symptoms.

You may find it helpful to track when symptoms occur in order to identify if they are cyclical.

Topical oestrogen preparations that are directly applied to the vulva, vagina and urethra are a highly effective way of increasing oestrogen into these areas quickly, reducing UTI symptoms.

#### TRY PROBIOTICS

These are foods and drinks that contain strains of the live “good” bacteria Lactobacilli.

They are found in fermented foods such as live yoghurts, kaffir, kimchi and sauerkraut and can be bought in supplement form. If you choose supplements, my advice is do your research as effectiveness is not only based on the presence of Lactobacillus but also having huge quantities and specific strains.

#### BE REFERRED FOR SPECIALIST TREATMENTS

It may seem you have exhausted all options but don't give up. There are more prescribable specialist treatments



‘Not everyone or every UTI is the same with symptoms and episodes varying from person to person’

for those with chronic symptoms. You can find out more by speaking with a specialist.

Antibiotics are a fantastic treatment for acute infections but with rising rates of resistance and the negative effect on gut health, often a mix of lifestyle changes and other medical treatments are needed to manage your symptoms.

It can be tempting to self-medicate but there are many causes that present similarly to UTIs (including some worrying ones) and it is important to know the underlying root cause for your safety.

With the right specialist support, you can find the solutions that will work best for you.

**Dr Shilpa McQuillan**, from Emmer Green, leads the Berkshire Menopause Clinic in Henley and is an accredited menopause specialist, community gynaecologist and women's health GP.

For more information, email [info@berkshirermenopauseclinic.com](mailto:info@berkshirermenopauseclinic.com) or visit [www.berkshirermenopauseclinic.com](http://www.berkshirermenopauseclinic.com)