

Wellness Health Report

# UTI Myths, Cleared Up

If a urinary tract infection has ever sneaked up on you, read this.

By Hallie Levine

**Y**ou probably know the symptoms of a UTI: that need to pee *right now* and the burning sensation when you do. But you may not know *why* you get these infections or how to stop them. We're busting six UTI myths wide open.

### Myth: We get UTIs *only* from sex.

Yes, sexytime is the most common cause; nearly 80 percent of infections in young women occur within a day of intercourse. "The back-and-forth rhythm propels bacteria from your vulva, vagina, or rectum into your bladder," explains Lisa Dabney, M.D., an assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. But UTIs also just happen—other triggers include wiping back to front and masturbating. Having a condition that blocks your urinary tract, like kidney stones, or that affects your immune system, like diabetes, can also make you likelier to get one. If you get them frequently but *not* after sex, let your doctor know.

### Myth: It's fine to just call your doctor and ask for meds.

Wrong move! "Even if a patient is sure she has a UTI, I still make her come in so I can get a sample," says Dr. Dabney. Why? Many conditions mimic UTI symptoms, and even hospitals screw them up. According to a 2015 study, fewer than half of the UTIs diagnosed in ERs were identified correctly (some were STIs!), so the visit to your doc is worth the trip. "If you don't have a UTI—or if you do but it doesn't respond to the antibiotic you have—we can adjust," Dr. Dabney says.

### Myth: Cranberry juice prevents UTIs.

Sorry, holiday beverages. "One theory was that cranberry juice altered your urine's pH level, making it more acidic and a less hospitable environment for bacteria," says Deepak A. Kapoor, M.D., president of Advanced Urology Centers of New York. But a large-scale review concluded that cranberry juice didn't really reduce the occurrence of UTIs. Stick to regular old H<sub>2</sub>O. "It will flush out the bladder without any sugar or artificial ingredients," says Dr. Kapoor.

### Myth: Peeing before and after sex prevents infection.


Hit the bathroom before *and* after sex, and you're in the clear, right? Unfortunately, there's never been great research that proves this habit reduces your chances of getting a UTI. Docs do recommend peeing, but only *after* sex, saying it can't hurt. "But if you urinate *before* sex, it's hard to urinate after, and you want a steady stream of urine to flush out bacteria," says Dr. Kapoor.

### Myth: Some sex positions increase your risk.

In truth, whether you're standing, sitting, or lying down doesn't matter. "Those bacteria are equal opportunity offenders: They'll find their way into your urethra anyway they can," says Mary Jane Minkin, M.D., a gynecologist at the Yale

School of Medicine. The one thing that does have an impact? "Switching from anal intercourse to vaginal is a guaranteed way to introduce bad bacteria into your urinary tract," Dr. Minkin says. (If you're going from anal to vaginal in the same session, have your partner wash off and use a new condom.) Too much suction during oral sex can also cause similar symptoms. "I've seen patients who can't pee or who complain that it burns because their partner has sucked so hard it inflamed their clitoris and urethra," says Hilda Hutcherson, M.D., an ob-gyn at Columbia University Medical Center. Love the enthusiasm, but ask your partner to ease up a smidge!

### Myth: UTIs are contagious.

Nope. While UTIs can be triggered by sex, your partner doesn't pass on the bacteria. "Bacteria living near the vulva and the opening to the urethra get pushed inside [the bladder] by intercourse," explains Dr. Dabney. But it's easy to see how this myth started: We often get UTIs when we have sex for the first time after a long break, or after hooking up with someone new. "When you change partners, sex becomes different," Dr. Kapoor says. "The length and girth of his penis and the way you both move during intercourse can affect how much bacteria gets swept into your urinary tract. As a result, you may find that you're more or less likely to get an infection." 

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