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Patient information: Urinary tract infections in adults (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is the urinary tract? — The urinary tract is the group of organs in the body that handle urine ([figure 1](#)). The urinary tract includes the:

- Kidneys, two bean-shaped organs that filter the blood to make urine
- Bladder, a balloon-shaped organ that stores urine
- Ureters, two tubes that carry urine from the kidneys to the bladder
- Urethra, the tube that carries urine from the bladder to the outside of the body

What are urinary tract infections? — Urinary tract infections, also called “UTIs,” are infections that affect either the bladder or the kidneys. Bladder infections are more common than kidney infections. Bladder infections happen when bacteria get into the urethra and travel up into the bladder. Kidney infections happen when the bacteria travel even higher, up into the kidneys. Both bladder and kidney infections are more common in women than men.

What are the symptoms of a bladder infection? — The symptoms include:

- Pain or a burning feeling when you urinate
- The need to urinate often
- The need to urinate suddenly or in a hurry
- Blood in the urine

What are the symptoms of a kidney infection? — The symptoms of a kidney infection can include the symptoms of a bladder infection, but kidney infections can also cause:

- Fever
- Back pain
- Nausea or vomiting

How do I find out if I have a urinary tract infection? — See your doctor or nurse. He or she will probably be able to tell if you have a urinary tract infection just by learning about your symptoms and doing a simple urine test. If your doctor or nurse thinks you might have a kidney infection or is unsure what you have, he or she might also do a more involved urine test to check for bacteria.

How are urinary tract infections treated? — Most urinary tract infections are treated with antibiotic pills. These pills work by killing the germs that cause the infection.

If you have a bladder infection, you will probably need to take antibiotics for 3 to 7 days. If you have a kidney infection, you will probably need to take antibiotics for longer—maybe for up to 2 weeks. If you have a kidney infection, it's also possible you will need to be treated in the hospital.

Your symptoms should begin to improve within a day of starting antibiotics. But you should finish all the antibiotic pills you get. Otherwise your infection might come back.

If needed, you can also take a medicine to numb your bladder. This medicine eases the pain caused by urinary tract infections. It also reduces the need to urinate.

What if I get bladder infections a lot? — First, check with your doctor or nurse to make sure that you are really having bladder infections. The symptoms of bladder infection can be caused by other things. Your doctor or nurse will want to see if those problems might be causing your symptoms.

But if you are really dealing with repeated infections, there are things you can do to keep from getting more infections. You can:

- Find a new method of birth control, if you use spermicides (sperm-killing creams). Using spermicides — especially with a diaphragm — seems to promote bladder infections in some women.
- Drink more fluid. There is no proof that this helps, but many doctors suggest doing it. It might help flush out germs, and it does no harm.
- Urinate right after sex. Some doctors think this helps, because it helps flush out germs that might get into the bladder during sex. There is no proof it works, but it also cannot hurt.
- Ask your doctor or nurse about vaginal estrogen, if you are a woman who has been through menopause. Vaginal estrogen comes in a cream or a flexible ring that you put into your vagina. It can help prevent bladder infections.

Can cranberry juice or other cranberry products prevent bladder infections? — The studies suggesting that cranberry products prevent bladder infections are not very good. But if you want to try cranberry products for this purpose, there is probably not much harm in doing so.

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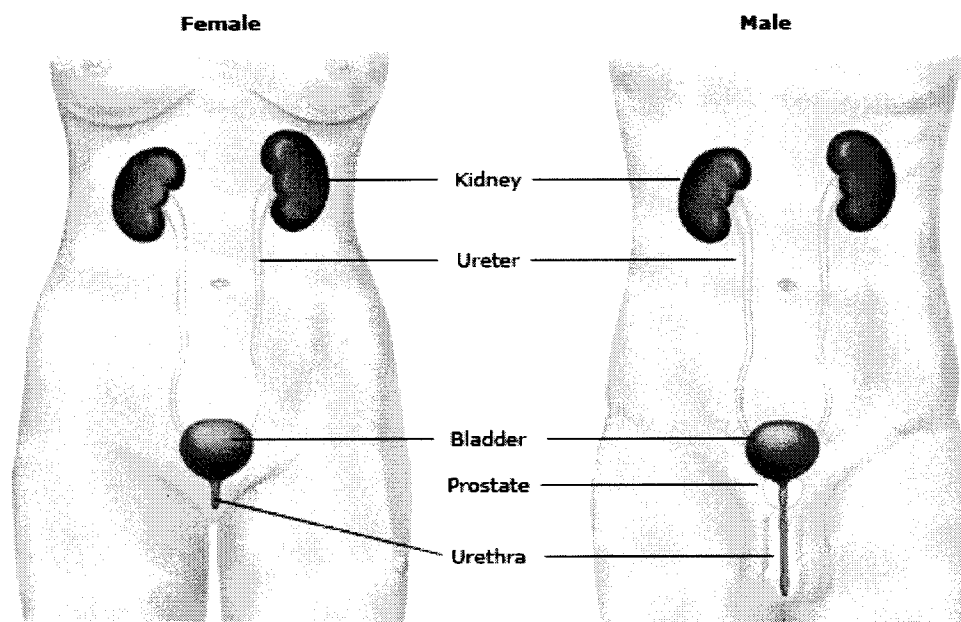
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GRAPHICS**Anatomy of the urinary tract**



Urine is made by the kidneys. It passes from the kidneys into the bladder through two tubes called the ureters. Then it leaves the bladder through another tube, called the urethra.