

<http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare>

An ongoing battle against the unfriendly organisms

We often immortalise the names of famous people – artists, scientists and even politicians – and sometimes in many different ways. Austrian/German paediatrician Dr Theodor Escherich gave his name to a bacterium.

He discovered this bad bug in 1885, but it wasn't until 1919, a few years after his death, that the Escherich family was accorded the dubious honour of always being associated with some kind of infection. Escherichia Coli is more usually abbreviated to E.coli and infections with these bacteria commonly cause symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps and diarrhoea.

A particularly troublesome strain of E. coli has hit the headlines recently having been identified as the cause of nearly 50 deaths amongst around 4000 people infected in Europe. The most vulnerable have been the very young and the very old, with kidney failure the most serious consequence.

Generally we tolerate the home-grown strains of E. coli reasonably well – they live fairly harmlessly in the intestine and the bowel – but they can occasionally cause irritating and very discomforting urinary tract infections (UTIs). So Kidney Health Australia has determined that 18-24 July should be known as “Wee Week”. It's all about emphasising the importance of a healthy urinary tract.

UTIs can involve just about any part of the urinary tract – the body's plumbing, filtration and liquid waste disposal system. The kidneys and the bladder can be affected, as can the ureter and the urethra – the “pipes” which carry urine to and from the bladder.

Urethritis is the medical term describing the infection when just the urethra is affected. If the infection spreads to the bladder causing the bladder lining to become raw and inflamed the condition is known as cystitis; whereas pyelonephritis is the name for the infection if it spreads to the kidneys.

All these conditions can cause a prickly, scalding or burning sensation when passing urine, and the urge to urinate frequently. If the bladder and kidney are affected, the urine might be cloudy or bloody and you may experience lower abdominal or back pain. Kidney-related infections are potentially very serious and need prompt treatment to avoid kidney damage.

Women, generally, are more likely than men to suffer with UTIs because the urethra is so short. Also, female hormones can affect urine acidity making it more likely the offending organisms can thrive – especially at certain times of the menstrual cycle, during pregnancy and menopause or after a hysterectomy. Sexually active women are more at risk because sex can push the bacteria into the urethra.

Men with prostate problems may have difficulties with urine flow and bladder emptying and so allow the bacteria more time to reproduce. Older people, or people with another chronic medical condition such as diabetes, where the immune system is already under stress, are also more likely to get UTIs.

The Pharmaceutical Society (PSA) has produced a Urinary Tract Infection fact card which has some self help hints on how to reduce the risk of urinary tract infections. And it starts with drinking enough water. There's no specific amount to drink each day – it will vary from person to person; but a good guide is sufficient to satisfy your thirst.

Most importantly, if you think you have a UTI and the simple non-prescription products are not successful, see your doctor promptly. An appropriate antibiotic will usually give the desired results quickly and safely. And you'll avoid any possible serious consequences.

Meanwhile, if you would like more information about UTIs, check out the Kidney Health website at www.kidney.org.au, or call into your local Self Care Pharmacy for a UTI fact card. For the nearest location phone PSA on 1 300 369 772 or click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder at www.psa.org.au.