

Epididymitis

The epididymis is a series of small tubes attached to the back of each testicle that collects and stores sperm. One of the most common causes of pain in the scrotum is epididymitis, which is an infection with associated inflammation of these coiled tubes. Epididymo-orchitis is the spread of the infection to the testicle.

Epididymitis is usually a secondary bacterial infection triggered by a range of conditions, such as urinary tract infections or sexually transmissible infections (STIs). The bacteria in the urethra (the tube carrying urine and sperm from the penis) move through the urinary and reproductive structures to the epididymis.

Treatment options include antibiotics and bed rest. Some men develop chronic epididymitis, which is inflammation even when there is no infection.

Symptoms

The symptoms of epididymitis include:

- Slight fever
- Chills
- Feeling of heaviness in the affected testicle
- Sensitivity to touch or pressure in the affected testicle
- Enlarged testicle
- Pain in the abdomen or pelvis
- Frequent urge to urinate
- Burning feeling when urinating
- Discharge from the penis
- Blood in the urine
- Pain when ejaculating.

A range of causes

Most cases of epididymitis are caused by bacterial infection. Some of the causes include:

- Urinary tract infections
- Sexually transmissible infections (STIs), such as chlamydia and gonorrhoea
- Recent genito-urinary surgery, including prostatectomy
- The use of urinary catheters
- Some congenital kidney and bladder problems.

Possible complications

If left untreated, acute epididymitis can lead to a range of complications including:

- **Chronic epididymitis** – persistent inflammation, even when there is no bacterial infection.
- **Abscess** – a ball of pus can accumulate inside the epididymis or nearby structures. Surgery is needed to drain the pus.
- **Destruction of the epididymis** – the inflammation can permanently damage or even destroy the epididymis and testicle. This can lead to infertility.
- **Spread of infection** – the infection can spread from the scrotum to any other structure or system of the body.

Diagnosis

It can be hard to tell the difference between epididymitis and testicular torsion, especially in younger men. Testicular torsion means the testicle has twisted and cut off its supply of blood. Sometimes epididymitis and testicular torsion happen at the same time.

Epididymitis can be diagnosed using a number of tests, including:

- Physical examination
- Medical history
- Urine tests
- STI tests
- Blood tests
- Ultrasound.

Treatment

The treatment options for epididymitis include:

- Antibiotics
- Antibiotics for any sexual partners, if an STI was the cause
- Bed rest
- Pain-killing medication
- Cold compresses applied regularly to the scrotum
- Elevating the scrotum
- A stay in hospital, in cases of severe infection
- Check-ups afterwards to make sure the infection has cleared up.

Chronic epididymitis

Some men develop chronic epididymitis, which is inflammation even when there is no infection. The cause isn't known, but it's thought that hypersensitivity of certain structures, including nerves and muscles, might cause or contribute to the condition. Some of the known risk factors include genito-urinary surgery, exposure to STIs and past acute epididymitis. However, a man without these risk factors can still develop the condition.

Diagnosis of chronic epididymitis

Tests are needed to distinguish chronic epididymitis from a range of other disorders that can cause constant scrotal pain such as testicular cancer, enlarged scrotal veins (varicocele) or a cyst in the epididymis. Tests can include a physical examination and ultrasound scan.

Treatment of chronic epididymitis

Chronic epididymitis is difficult to treat. Since there is no infection, antibiotics don't work. Some of the treatment options can include:

- Frequent warm baths
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs
- Medications to relax associated muscles
- Medications to alter nerve messages to the scrotum
- Anaesthetic or steroid injections into the scrotum
- Surgery to remove the affected epididymis
- Stress management techniques.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Urologist

- Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100

Things to remember

- Epididymitis is an infection and associated inflammation of the epididymis, a series of small tubes attached to the back of each testicle that collects and stores sperm.
- Most cases of epididymitis are caused by bacterial infection from urinary tract infections or STIs like gonorrhoea or chlamydia.
- Treatment options include antibiotics and bed rest.
- Some men develop chronic epididymitis, which is inflammation even when there is no infection.

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