Chancroid ? What's that? [1]

Dear Alice,

What is Chancroid?
What are the symptoms?
How is it diagnosed?
How is it treated?
What can happen if it's not treated?
How many children are affected by this and are newborn babies affected, too?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Chancroid (it starts with a "sh" sound) is a bacterial infection passed through sexual contact. The bacteria, Haemophilus ducreyi, are transmitted when someone comes into contact with an infected individual’s sores. Painful, open sores and swollen lymph nodes in the groin area are the primary symptoms of chancroid. Infected individuals should expect to see the sores appear as tender red bumps occurring in or around the genital and anal areas within a few days to two weeks after contact with an infected individual. The sores grow and become more like ulcers and may begin bleeding. Sores rarely spread to other areas of the body outside of the genitals. To test for chancroid, a health care provider will examine the sores and swollen lymph nodes visually, and collect a sample from one of the sores for a laboratory test. Getting a clear diagnosis will assure appropriate treatment, as symptoms of chancroid can be confused with primary syphilis.

Once diagnosed, chancroid is treated with antibiotics, which usually heal the sores quickly with minimal scarring in about three to seven days. It's recommended that those who have a positive diagnosis also be tested for HIV. Sometimes recovery takes longer, depending on the size of the ulcer(s) and the individual. Those infected who also have HIV may experience slower healing. Treatment may also include draining lymph nodes if they are large. As with any treatment regimen of antibiotics, taking all the medication as prescribed, even if someone starts to feel better before s/he's finished the medication, is essential for maximum effectiveness. A follow-up appointment to see a health care provider at the end of the treatment period is recommended to ensure that the infection has cleared up. People with a chancroid infection should refrain from vaginal, anal, and oral sex until the treatment is
complete. Additionally, any sex partners of those diagnosed should also be evaluated and if necessary, treated. Chancroid can cause damage to the skin and genitals if left untreated. It's also known to increase a person's chance of getting (and transmitting) HIV.

As with other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), the key lies in prevention. Using a condom and/or dam correctly and consistently is ideal, but they won't protect against chancroid if they aren't covering an area with an active sore. It's also a good idea to know what your body looks and feels like when it's healthy. That way, when you experience a symptom or change that is different than usual, you'll know it's time to see your health care provider.

As for how common chancroid is, it's relatively rare in the United States, and appears to be more prevalent in developing countries. However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) caution that due to the difficulty in obtaining an H. ducreyi culture, chancroid may be underdiagnosed in this country. As for your final question, no cases of a newborn getting chancroid from a mother with active sores has been reported.

The CDC is a great resource for more information about chancroid, and if you're interested in learning about other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), check out Go Ask Alice!'s STI Q&A category.

Take care,

Alice!

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Other STI's

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