

Our Doctor Writes

April 2008

After all of the medical politics that has been occupying the headlines recently I thought it would be a good time to get back to a clinical topic for a change.

Pathogens are organisms that cause us problems. The one that I would like to focus on this month is a tiny bacterium, much smaller than most it's called *Chlamydia trachomatis*. Many pathogens make us very unwell very quickly and sometimes in a spectacular fashion. They cause a short infection and there is a risk of dying with them. Infections such as those caused by the Ebola virus and bacteria causing meningitis come to mind. These organisms don't have a particular good survival strategy in this respect. What good is a host to infect if in a short period the host is dead? Chlamydia on the other hand is a stealth fighter. It likes to sneak in under the radar, cause as little fuss as possible and hope to get away with a much longer relationship with those that are infected. Combine this with easy transmissibility and we are faced with a daunting foe indeed!

World wide Chlamydia is a major cause of blindness especially in Africa. In the UK and other western countries it has developed a different niche existence. Here it behaves as a sexually transmitted disease. It is highly transmissible and causes little in the way of symptoms. In men it may cause some urethritis (a mild burning feeling when passing urine), in women the initial symptoms are often missed altogether. Untreated it goes on to cause inflammation and scarring predominantly affecting the pelvic organs. It is a common cause of pelvic inflammatory disease can lead to difficulties with fertility and a big increase in the risk of developing an ectopic pregnancy. "A formidable foe!", I hear you cry.

So what can be done to try to protect or treat ourselves? Well the maxim of prevention is better than cure is never truer than in this context. Confidence that a partner has not got the infection is helpful. The use of barrier methods of contraception is also a wise strategy to adopt. If you think that you might have a Chlamydia infection either because of symptoms or previous risk then the good news is that there are freely available tests that can pick it up. These are available from your GP or from the local Genito Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinic. Once diagnosed the treatment is really easy as well. The organism is sensitive to the right choice of simple and available antibiotics.

The message is simple. If you think you might be at risk act. Talk to your GP or practice nurse. If you would rather, then ring the GUM clinic. Our local clinic is at Great Western hospital in Swindon (01793604038).

Best wishes – Dr Tim Ballard