

Bladder Infection Testing in Older Adults

Frequently Asked Questions

When an older person's behaviour or health changes, some signs and symptoms might seem like a bladder infection. But there could be other causes for this change. Here are some common questions about how health care providers check if it's a bladder infection or something else.

What are signs of a bladder infection?

- Burns/hurts to urinate
- Hard to urinate or need to urinate more often
- Fever
- Pain on side, lower stomach or back
- Blood in urine (less common)

What are not signs of a bladder infection?

- Smelly or cloudy urine alone
- Changes in behaviour or feeling confused alone

Can we use a urine test to screen for a bladder infection?

There is no test that can screen for a bladder infection. Health care providers may order a test using a urine dipstick to check. But this test is not helpful for older adults over the age of 65. Older adults often have bacteria in their urine, which can show a positive result even if they have no infection. Instead of using a urine dipstick, health care providers should first check symptoms and see if there are minimum signs of a bladder infection before sending the urine to a lab.

Why aren't we doing anything about my loved one's symptoms?

Not ordering a urine test does not mean health care providers are ignoring symptoms. When someone's health changes, health care providers do many things to figure out what's going on. They will:

- Check temperature, pulse, breathing, and blood pressure (these are called vital signs) and watch them closely.
- Review their medications to make sure none are causing the problem.
- Encourage them to drink more fluids as often as they can handle.
- Look at their bowel and bladder habits and see if anything needs to change.

If their symptoms change or get worse, they will do an assessment to see what is causing the problem.

Last time my loved one was confused, they had a bladder infection and received antibiotics.

Can we do this again?

When someone is confused, they are checked to make sure it's not a sign of infection (known as sepsis). If there are no signs of infection, confusion can have lots of causes. Feeling better after antibiotics might not be because of the medication itself, but other care, like more fluids or medication changes. Without clear signs of a bladder infection, some testing and treatments can do more harm than good.

Can we give my loved one antibiotics? I'd rather be safe than sorry.

Antibiotics have risks. They can cause problems like diarrhea, rash, and nausea, and even kill helpful bacteria in the body, which can lead to more infections later on.

Using antibiotics when they are not needed can also make bacteria stronger and harder to treat later. If signs of a bladder infection show up, antibiotics can help, but they should only be used when they are really needed.

If my loved one starts acting different, can I have a urine test right away?

When someone's mental state or behaviour changes, it could be due to lots of things like needing more fluids (dehydration) or new medications. Everything needs to be considered to find the right treatment. Testing for a bladder infection when there aren't any symptoms might lead in the wrong direction and cause other important reasons for the change to be missed.

Are we sure my loved one's infection is gone? Should we test their urine again?

If your loved one has a bladder infection and it has been treated, the health care provider will check if their symptoms have improved. There is no need to test their urine again because it might show bacteria that is not causing an infection.

My loved one doesn't seem to have the usual signs of a bladder infection. Can we test them just to be sure?

There are guidelines to follow when someone might have a bladder infection, even if they don't show common symptoms. Even if there are small changes, if they're not too severe, it is likely they don't have an infection right now.

The emergency health care providers said it was something called "urosepsis", and we should have known. Why didn't we test for this?

We have ways to spot sepsis by watching for sudden changes in health and vital signs. If we think someone has sepsis, they might need to go to the emergency room, depending on their care wishes.

Could changes in the smell or look of urine mean they have a bladder infection?

Things like diet and or not having enough fluids (dehydration) can affect how urine looks and smells, so they're not reliable signs of a bladder infection. Instead, health care providers will look at other symptoms.

Does a blocked catheter mean there is a bacterial infection?

For people with catheters, a blockage doesn't always mean an infection or needing antibiotics. It can happen for lots of reasons, and health care providers will look for signs of infection.

How can I help?

A loved one might not be able to tell their health care providers how they feel, so family members and caregivers often notice changes first. Tell the health care provider team about any changes or concerns you notice.

About Choosing Wisely Canada

Choosing Wisely Canada is the national voice for reducing unnecessary tests and treatments in health care. One of its important functions is to help clinicians and patients engage in conversations that lead to smart and effective care choices.

How this was created:

This information was reviewed by Dr. Jerome Leis, Using Antibiotics Wisely Lead for Choosing Wisely Canada. This information is for you to use when talking with your health care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this information is at your own risk.