

HEARING PATIENT VOICES

Definition of chronic UTI

A urinary tract infection (UTI), also known as cystitis, bladder infection, water infection, kidney infection or pyelonephritis, is an infection occurring anywhere in the urinary tract—from the kidneys to the urethra. A lower UTI involves the bladder and anything below, like the urethra and prostate. An upper UTI involves the urinary system above the bladder, such as the ureters and kidneys (pyelonephritis).

A chronic UTI is an embedded bacterial infection in the bladder and/or other part of the urinary tract. It is usually a result an acute infection or series of infections that never fully went away. A chronic UTI can ‘flare’, which for some people feels like multiple separate acute infections. While some people feel symptom free between flares, others feel constant milder symptoms between flares.

Most doctors test urine samples for signs of infection using a dipstick at their clinic and/or send a sample to a clinical laboratory to try to ‘culture’ bacteria. Unfortunately, these tests have high rates of failure to detect genuine infections. This is especially the case when the infection has become embedded and are relatively few free-floating bacteria.

Once a UTI has progressed to a chronic form, it is hard to diagnose and can become difficult to treat. There are currently no tests or treatment guidelines for chronic UTI in Australia. Not all doctors recognise chronic UTI as a disease or know how to treat it.

People with more than two positive UTIs in six months, or more than three positive UTIs in one year, are generally diagnosed as having recurrent UTIs. People with ongoing or intermittent UTI symptoms and negative test results are commonly diagnosed with a urinary syndrome, such as interstitial cystitis/painful bladder syndrome (IC/PBS). People with UTI symptoms and a mix of positive and negative UTI test results can fall somewhere in between. Based on new research, including newly discovered mechanisms of microbial behavior within the bladder, we believe many of these people are suffering from a chronic UTI.