

# Trichomoniasis

## The “Neglected” Sexually Transmitted Disease

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### KEYWORDS

- *Trichomonas vaginalis* • Vaginitis • Urethritis • Nucleic acid amplification tests
- Nitroimidazoles • Sexually transmitted disease

### KEY POINTS

- Although *Trichomonas vaginalis* is the most prevalent curable sexually transmitted infection, it has been considered a “neglected” parasitic infection, due to limited knowledge of its sequelae and associated costs.
- Newly available diagnostic methods, including nucleic acid amplification tests, may improve the ability to identify trichomoniasis in the clinical setting.
- Infections usually can be cured with a single oral dose of a nitroimidazole antimicrobial (eg, metronidazole or tinidazole). Allergy and antimicrobial resistance are of concern, given the lack of effective treatment alternatives.
- Prevention approaches include condoms and treatment for all sex partners.

### INTRODUCTION

Trichomoniasis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) caused by the parasite *Trichomonas vaginalis* (Fig. 1). Although this infection is common in the United States and worldwide, it has been considered a “neglected” parasitic infection, due to limited knowledge of its sequelae and associated costs.

### EPIDEMIOLOGY

*T vaginalis* infection is the most prevalent nonviral sexually transmitted infection:

- In the United States, an estimated 3.7 million people are infected with *T vaginalis*, more than chlamydia and gonorrhea combined.<sup>1</sup>

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The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the CDC.

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Fig. 1. *Trichomonas vaginalis* parasites.

- There are an estimated 1.1 million new *T vaginalis* infections annually in the United States.<sup>1</sup>
- About 3% of the United States population is believed to carry *T vaginalis* infection.<sup>2</sup>

Health disparities by sex, age, and race are prominent in the epidemiology of *T vaginalis*:

- Infections are believed to be more common among women, with an estimated 16 infected women for every 10 infected men.<sup>3</sup>
- Infections are more common with increasing age, with prevalence peaking above 11% among women aged 40 years and older.<sup>2,4</sup>
- Infections are more common among certain racial and ethnic groups, affecting an estimated 13.3% of black women and 1.8% of Hispanic women, compared with 1.3% of white women in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Particularly high prevalences of *T vaginalis* infection have been detected among incarcerated men and women (up to 32%)<sup>5</sup> and patients at STD clinics (up to 17%).<sup>6</sup> In addition, incident *T vaginalis* infections are up to twice as common among individuals infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).<sup>7,8</sup> By contrast, studies among men who have sex with men have found low prevalences of *T vaginalis* infection.<sup>9,10</sup>

### **PATHOPHYSIOLOGY**

The *T vaginalis* parasite is a single-celled protozoan with 4 flagella at one end. Under a microscope, these flagella may be seen propelling the parasite. Infection may produce local inflammation as parasites adhere to mucosal tissue. *T vaginalis* parasites can infect both women and men, and are passed readily between sex partners, usually during penile-vaginal sex.<sup>11</sup>

*T vaginalis* thrives in certain moist areas of the body:

- Urethra, male or female
- Vagina
- Vulva

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