

# Choosing Wisely®

*An initiative of the ABIM Foundation*



## Tests & treatments for urinary tract infections (UTIs) in older people

### When you need them—and when you don't

**U**TIs are infections of the urinary tract. The main symptoms of UTIs are:

- A burning feeling when you urinate
- A strong urge to urinate often

Bacteria cause most UTIs. Doctors usually treat UTIs with antibiotics, which are strong medicines that kill bacteria.

Older adults are often tested for UTIs, especially in nursing homes. But if you don't have symptoms, urine tests are not very useful. The tests can lead to unnecessary treatments that can even be harmful. This is especially true in older adults. Here's why:

**Urine tests usually don't help if you don't have UTI symptoms.**

Older people often have bacteria in their urine, even if they have no urinary symptoms. This is true for nearly half of all nursing home residents.



Doctors will often order a urine test if an older adult has vague symptoms, such as increased confusion, irritability, or falling. The test will probably show some bacteria. This may lead the doctor to order an antibiotic.

But if the bacteria is in the urine and not causing a real infection, the antibiotic won't help the vague symptoms. There are many other reasons why an older adult might be confused or irritable, or fall.

### **Antibiotics can cause serious problems.**

Antibiotics can cause side effects, especially in older adults. Side effects include fever, rash, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, ruptured tendons, nerve damage, and kidney failure.

Using antibiotics can lead to vaginal yeast infections and other infections, including one that can cause severe diarrhea, a hospital stay, and even death in older people.

Also, older adults often take other medicines that can interact dangerously with antibiotics.

### **Avoid antibiotics when you can.**

Unnecessary antibiotics don't offer any benefits. You should not take antibiotics for bacteria in the urine if you don't need to.

Antibiotics can kill "friendly" germs and help drug-resistant bacteria to grow. Resistant bacteria cause illnesses that are harder to cure and more costly to treat. To treat them, a doctor may have to try a few different antibiotics. This increases the risk of serious side effects.

### **Unnecessary tests and treatment can be a waste of money.**

A urine culture can cost \$80 or more. Antibiotic treatment for a UTI costs from \$3 to over \$300. And drug-resistant infections add costs for more doctor visits, expensive medicines, and nursing care.

### **When should you have a urine test?**

You should get a urine test if you have new or worsening urinary symptoms like these:

- Pain when urinating
- Blood in the urine
- A strong urge to urinate often

You should also get a urine test if you have a fever or if a blood test suggests that you have an infection. But before you get a urine test, your doctor should make sure you don't have other symptoms, like a cough, that may be caused by something else.

If you don't have UTI symptoms, you might still need a urine test if you are scheduled to have:

- Prostate surgery.
- Kidney stones removed.
- Bladder tumors removed.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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