

What is balanitis and what are the symptoms?

Balanitis is an irritation of the end of the penis (the glans). Often the foreskin is also inflamed. Balanitis is common, and it can occur at any age. It is not usually serious.

Symptoms include redness, irritation, and soreness of the end of the penis. It can range from a small patch of redness confined to part of the skin surface of the glans, to the whole glans becoming red, swollen and painful. Sometimes there is a thick clumpy discharge under the foreskin. You may have pain when you pass urine.

What can cause balanitis?

Many things can cause balanitis. Sometimes it can be tricky to identify the exact cause.

Allergy and irritants

The skin of the glans is sensitive. It may 'react' and become inflamed in some situations, for example:

- If you do not wash under your foreskin, old skin, urine, sweat, or other 'debris' can collect there. This may irritate the glans leading to inflammation.
- Certain soaps and disinfectants can irritate the skin.
- Over-washing or scrubbing may also irritate the delicate skin of the glans.
- Condoms, spermicides, the lubricant in condoms, and lubricants used when having sex can irritate the skin in some men.
- Chemicals spilt on your hands may be transferred to the penis when you go to the toilet.
- Some washing powders or fabric conditioners that are not rinsed well from underwear can cause irritation.

An allergy may develop after years of use of a product which has not previously caused problems.

Infection

Various germs that live on the skin in small numbers may multiply and cause infection. The most common infection is a yeast called Candida. (Candida is the same germ that causes vaginal thrush in women). Some types of bacteria also cause balanitis. Any man or boy can develop an infection but an infection of the glans is more likely to develop if you:

- Already have some inflammation of the penis due to an allergy or irritant.
- Have diabetes. People with diabetes can be more likely to have infections, particularly candida, especially if the diabetes is not well controlled and the urine contains sugar. After going to the toilet, drops of urine which contain sugar may remain behind the foreskin. This is an ideal environment for bacteria to multiply.
- Have a phimosis. This is a condition where the foreskin does not pull back over the glans. You are more likely to get a balanitis if you have a phimosis as sweat, debris and urine may collect under the foreskin. This can irritate directly, or can encourage germs to thrive and cause infection.

Sexually transmitted infections rarely cause balanitis.

Do I need any tests?

Not usually. A doctor or nurse can usually diagnose balanitis by the red and inflamed look of the end of the penis. The commonest cause is skin irritation. In this case your doctor or nurse will give advice and treatment. The inflammation is likely to settle within a few days.

If another cause is suspected or the balanitis does not clear with treatment, we may suggest:

- Tests for sexually transmitted infections, based on your history.
- A swab to look for certain bacteria that can cause infection.
- A urine sample to check for sugar (if diabetes is suspected).
- Referral to a skin specialist if a skin condition is thought to be the cause.
- Rarely, if the inflammation persists, a biopsy (small sample) of inflamed skin may be taken to look at under the microscope. This can help to find the cause.

What is the treatment for balanitis?

Treatment depends on the cause.

In most cases: Stop using soap or shower gel. Wash twice a day with salty water (not more often). Use a table spoon of salt in a bathroom sinkful of water, or half a cup of salt in a six inch deep bath. Gently pat the skin dry. **DON'T use disinfectant!**

Use emollient (soothing) creams such as E45® or Diprobase® to soothe and moisturize the skin and Aqueous® cream instead of soap.

- If this does not help, a mild steroid cream (hydrocortisone 0.5% Or 1%) can be used

Other treatments

- An anti-yeast cream or a course of anti-yeast tablets is the treatment in cases due to Candida.
- Antibiotics will clear infection caused by bacteria.

If you have recurring balanitis or have a phimosis, then an option is to be circumcised to remove the foreskin.

Can balanitis be prevented?

Tips which may help to prevent some cases of balanitis include:

- Wash the glans each day. Pull the foreskin back gently whilst in the bath or shower. Then gently clean the glans using an emollient or an un-perfumed soap. Make sure the penis and glans are dry before you put on underwear. If symptoms are related to condom use, try using a condom which is designed for sensitive skin such as latex free (ask your pharmacist or sexual health clinic for advice).
- Wash underwear with non-biological detergents and rinse well.
- Wash your hands before going to the toilet if you work with chemicals which can irritate delicate skin.

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