Symptoms of non-gonococcal urethritis in heterosexual men: a case control study

P Iser, TR H Read, S Tabrizi, C Bradshaw, D Lee, L Horvarth, S Garland, I Denham, C K Fairley

Methods: Case-control study of heterosexual men with non-gonococcal urethral symptoms (cases) and without urethral symptoms (controls) attending Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, Australia. Sexual behaviour and condom use were measured by questionnaire. First stream urine was tested for potential pathogens: *Chlamydia trachomatis* (ligase chain reaction), *Mycoplasma genitalium* (polymerase chain reaction, PCR), *Ureaplasma urealyticum* (culture and PCR), and *Streptococcus* spp, *Gardnerella vaginalis*, and *Haemophilus* species (culture). Urethral smears from cases were examined for polymorphonuclear leucocytes.

Objective: To determine microbial and behavioural factors contributing to non-gonococcal urethral symptoms in men.

Methods: Case-control study of heterosexual men with non-gonococcal urethral symptoms (cases) and without urethral symptoms (controls) attending Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, Australia. Sexual behaviour and condom use were measured by questionnaire. First stream urine was tested for potential pathogens: *Chlamydia trachomatis* (ligase chain reaction), *Mycoplasma genitalium* (polymerase chain reaction, PCR), *Ureaplasma urealyticum* (culture and PCR), and *Streptococcus* spp, *Gardnerella vaginalis*, and *Haemophilus* species (culture). Urethral smears from cases were examined for polymorphonuclear leucocytes.

Results: 80 cases and 79 controls were recruited over 4 months in 2002–3. 49 cases (61%) had urethritis by microscopic criteria, 17 (21%) had *Chlamydia trachomatis* (adjusted odds ratio (OR) 27 (95% confidence interval (CI): 3.4 to 222)), five (6%) had *Mycoplasma genitalium* (OR 6.1 (95% CI: 0.6 to 61)), and 11 (14%) had *Gardnerella vaginalis* (OR 9.0 (95% CI: 1.6 to 52)). Other organisms were not significantly associated with urethral symptoms. The presence of urethritis on urethral smear did not predict the presence of *Chlamydia trachomatis* (OR 1.7 (95% CI: 0.5 to 5.4)). Urethral symptoms were significantly associated with unprotected vaginal sex with more than one casual partner (OR 9.3 (95% CI: 1.3 to 65)) and unprotected anal sex with a regular partner in the past month (OR 3.5 (95% CI: 1.0 to 13)).

Conclusion: *Gardnerella vaginalis* and unprotected anal sex may cause symptoms of non-gonococcal urethritis. Microscopy of the urethral smear to diagnose urethritis in this population does not help to identify which men with urethral symptoms require treatment for chlamydia.

Methods

The study was conducted at Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, Australia, from December 2002 to March 2003 with ethics committee approval. Men were included if they had urethral symptoms (discharge, dysuria, or urethral discomfort) for less than 1 month. Men were ineligible if they had HIV infection, urethral gonorrhoea on Gram stain, male sexual partners, a current episode of genital herpes, or had taken antibiotics in the previous month. Controls were men without urethral symptoms attending the clinic during the same period, with the same exclusion criteria. Cases had a urethral smear collected and all participants provided a first pass urine specimen and completed a behavioural questionnaire.

Polymorphonuclear leucocytes on Gram stained urethral smear were counted in five oil immersion ×1000 polymorphs per high power fields (hpf). Urethritis was defined as the presence of 5 polymorphs/hpf or more. First stream urine from cases and controls was tested for streptococci, *Haemophilus* species, *Gardnerella vaginalis*, and *Ureaplasma urealyticum* by culture and *Chlamydia trachomatis* by ligase chain reaction (LCx, Abbott Diagnostics, Abbott Park, IL, USA) and *Mycoplasma genitalium* and *Ureaplasma urealyticum* by polymerase chain reaction (PCR).

A volume of 1 ml of urine was centrifuged and resultant pellet extracted using the automated MagNA Pure LC (Roche Molecular Biochemical, Mannheim, Germany) with the DNA Isolation Kit I protocol. Each extracted DNA was amplified by PCR for two targets utilising 5 μl aliquots of the DNA. Detection of *M genitalium* was performed as described previously. Detection of *U urealyticum* was performed using adaptation of a previously described assay targeting amplification of a 429 base pair sequence of urease structural gene to real time PCR using a Taqman probe.

Data were analysed on SPSS for Windows Version 11, Chicago, IL, USA. Crude odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for categorical variables and numerical variables were analysed using a *t* test or non-parametric equivalent. Two adjusted analyses were performed using logistic regression. In the first, all identified organisms were modelled to determine which were independently associated with NGU after adjusting for the primary behavioural risk factor, unprotected vaginal sex, and past urethral symptoms. In the second, odds ratios for the association of selected behavioural characteristics with NGU symptoms were assessed after adjusting for the main risk factor, unprotected vaginal sex. This study had a power of 80% to detect an odds ratio of 2.6 if the exposure variable was present in 30% of the controls (p = 0.05 two sided).

Abbreviations: NGU, non-gonococcal urethritis; PCR, polymerase chain reaction
unprotected oral sex was not.

Other organisms (p = 0.2).

All streptococci

Group B streptococci

Haemophilus influenzae

Gardnerella vaginalis

Mycoplasma genitalium

Previous similar symptoms

Regular sexual partner

Vaginal sex

Oral sex

Anal sex

Casual sexual partner (past month)

Vaginal sex

Oral sex

Anal sex

Any

1

1

1

1

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CONTRIBUTORS
PI carried out the research project; TR and CF contributed to protocol design and wrote the paper with CB; ST and SG performed the PCR assays and contributed to the paper; ID and LH contributed to protocol design; and LH performed diagnostic microbiology; DL contributed to the paper.

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