Toxic shock syndrome is a rare, life-threatening complication of certain types of bacterial infections. Often toxic shock syndrome results from toxins produced by Staphylococcus aureus (staph) bacteria, but the condition may also be caused by toxins produced by group A streptococcus (strep) bacteria.

Toxic shock syndrome has been associated primarily with the use of superabsorbent tampons. However, since manufacturers pulled certain types of tampons off the market, the incidence of toxic shock syndrome in menstruating women has declined.

Toxic shock syndrome can affect anyone, including men, children and postmenopausal women. Risk factors for toxic shock syndrome include skin wounds and surgery.

Possible signs and symptoms of toxic shock syndrome include:

- A sudden high fever
- Low blood pressure (hypotension)
- Vomiting or diarrhea
- A rash resembling a sunburn, particularly on your palms and soles
- Confusion
- Muscle aches
- Redness of your eyes, mouth and throat
- Seizures
- Headaches

When to see a doctor

Call your doctor immediately if you have signs or symptoms of toxic shock syndrome. This is especially important if you've recently used tampons or if you have a skin or wound infection.
Causes

Most commonly, Staphylococcus aureus (staph) bacteria cause toxic shock syndrome. The syndrome can also be caused by group A streptococcus (strep) bacteria.

Risk factors

Toxic shock syndrome can affect anyone. About half the cases of toxic shock syndrome associated with Staphylococci bacteria occur in women of menstruating age; the rest occur in older women, men and children. Streptococcal toxic shock syndrome occurs in people of all ages.

Toxic shock syndrome has been associated with:

- Having cuts or burns on your skin
- Having had recent surgery
- Using contraceptive sponges, diaphragms or superabsorbent tampons
- Having a viral infection, such as the flu or chickenpox

Complications

Toxic shock syndrome can progress rapidly. Complications may include:

- Shock
- Renal failure
- Death

Prevention

Manufacturers of tampons sold in the United States no longer use the materials or designs that were associated with toxic shock syndrome. Also, the Food and Drug Administration requires manufacturers to use standard measurement and labeling for absorbency and to print guidelines on the boxes.

If you use tampons, read the labels and use the lowest absorbency tampon you can. Change tampons frequently, at least every four to eight hours. Alternate using tampons and sanitary napkins, and use minipads when your flow is light.

Toxic shock syndrome can recur. People who've had it once can get it again. If you've had toxic shock syndrome or a prior serious staph or strep infection, don't use tampons.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

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