



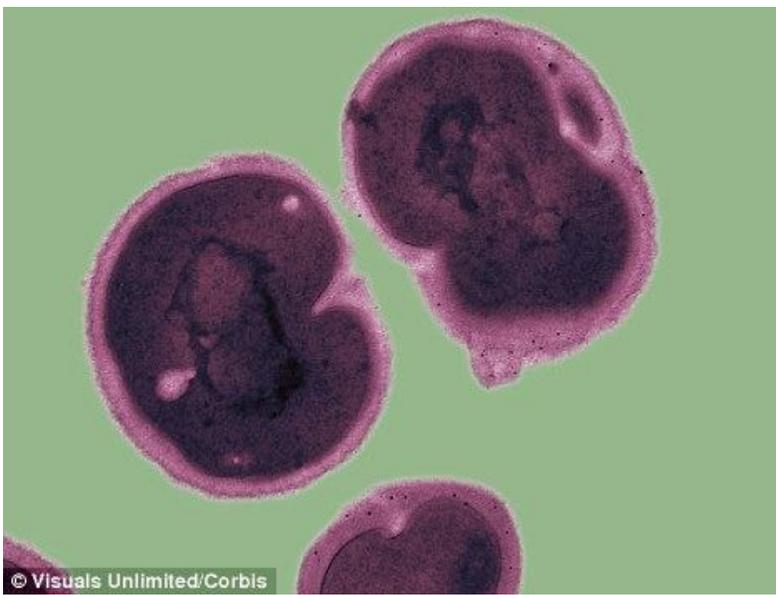
Strain of gonorrhoea that infects millions each year 'could soon be untreatable', says World Health Organisation

- **Babies born to gonorrhoea-infected mothers have 50 per cent chance of being blind**
- **106million new cases of disease annually - the second most common STD after chlamydia**
- **Scientists blame overuse of antibiotics coupled with bacteria's astonishing ability to adapt**
- **Doctors in Britain switching to using combination of antibiotics over longer period of time**
- **Close to becoming a superbug as researchers admit they can do little to halt its rapid spread**

A 'super' strain of untreatable gonorrhoea is sweeping developed countries across the world including Britain and Northern Ireland.

The sexually transmitted disease, which infects millions of people every year, is becoming resistant to all antibiotics, according to the World Health Organisation.

The U.N. health agency is urging governments and doctors to step up surveillance of the STD, the second most common after chlamydia.



Dangerous mutations: *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*, the bacterium that causes Gonorrhoea, is developing new strands resistant to every treatment

Gonorrhoea can cause inflammation, infertility, pregnancy complications and, in extreme cases, lead to maternal death.

Babies born to mothers with gonorrhoea have a 50 per cent chance of developing eye infections that can result in blindness.

'This organism has basically been developing resistance against every medication we've thrown at it,' said Dr Manjula Lusti-Narasimhan, a scientist in WHO's department of STDs.

This includes a group of antibiotics called cephalosporins currently considered the last line of treatment. Resistance to cephalosporins was first reported in Japan, but more recently has also been detected in Britain, Australia, France, Sweden and Norway.

As these are all countries with well-developed health systems, it is likely that cephalosporin-resistant strains are also circulating undetected elsewhere.

More than 17,000 new cases of gonorrhoea were reported in the UK in 2009. Young men and women are affected most – the highest rates of gonorrhoea are seen in women aged 16-19 and men aged 20-24.

'I think this is probably only the tip of the iceberg,' said Professor Catherine Ison, who oversees the national surveillance program for treatment of resistant gonorrhoea in England and Wales.



Clap: Disease used to be rife among sailors, soldiers and prostitutes as this American sexual hygiene poster warns
Doctors have blamed overuse or misuse of antibiotics for the disease moving towards becoming a superbug, coupled with the bacteria's astonishing ability to adapt.

Professor Ison said doctors in Britain are now switching to using a combination of antibiotics over a longer period of time to combat resistant gonorrhoea. Dr Lusti-Narasimhan said that better sex education was needed, as proper condom use is an effective means of stopping transmission.

'We're not going to be able to get rid of it completely,'

she said in an interview ahead of WHO's public announcement on its 'global action plan' to combat the disease. 'But we can limit the spread.'



Concern: The STD is the second most common in the UK and affects more than 17,000 people a year (posed by model)

'In a couple of years it will have become resistant to every treatment option we have available now.' Dr Lusti-Narasimhan said the new guidance is aimed at ending complacency about gonorrhoea and encouraging researchers to speed up their hunt for a new cure.

Once considered a scourge of sailors and soldiers, gonorrhoea - known colloquially as the clap - became easily treatable with the discovery of penicillin.

Now, the global health body estimates that gonorrhoea is responsible for 106million infections annually.

It also increases the chances of infection with other diseases, such as HIV.

'It's not a European problem or an African problem, it's really a worldwide problem,' said Dr Lusti-Narasimhan.

These bacteria survive antibiotic treatment due to a mutation that makes them resistant, then quickly spread their genes in an accelerated process of natural selection.

This is a general problem affecting all antibiotics, but gonorrhoea is particularly quick to adapt because it is good at picking up snippets of DNA from other bacteria, said Dr Lusti-Narasimhan.

'If it didn't do so much damage it would actually be a fun organism to study,' she said.

The over-the-counter availability of low potency antibiotics in some Asian countries is another reason resistance is increasing, she said.

The Geneva-based WHO wants countries not just to tighten their rules for antibiotic use but also to improve their surveillance systems so that the full extent of the problem can be determined.