

## Mail Today

Can a urinary tract infection actually kill you? The recent death of model Mariana Bridi da Costa of a UTI has raised this question and alarm

**BY MEGHNIEN DUTTA LINGAM**

IT ALL began in December when Brazilian model Mariana Bridi da Costa approached doctors complaining of abdominal pain which they attributed to kidney stones, and prescribed medication. Days later, she was hospitalised for septicemia, which is actually blood poisoning. It was later discovered that the latent cause for this was actually a urinary tract infection (UTI). But by the time it was discovered, the bacteria causing the infection had spread throughout her body, preventing blood flow to her organs and necessitating an amputation of her hands and feet. Mariana died as a result. Following this incident, speculation is rife about whether UTI alone can cause death, especially since this is a common infection. Here we present you some of the medical facts that should help you decide.

### URINARY INFECTIONS ARE VERY COMMON

Remember how your grandmother raved and ranted about how the Indian style toilets were the best, while criticising the Western ceramic throne for being a seat of germs. Well, she was right. While plonking on the pot might be an easy option, it's also the best chance for bugs to enter the body causing infections. Any part of your urinary system can become infected by a urinary tract infection. Commonly, bacteria or germs that sit in your anal or vaginal region can climb up to enter the urinary tract. Once these bacteria enter this zone, they could travel further upwards causing infection in the kidneys too.

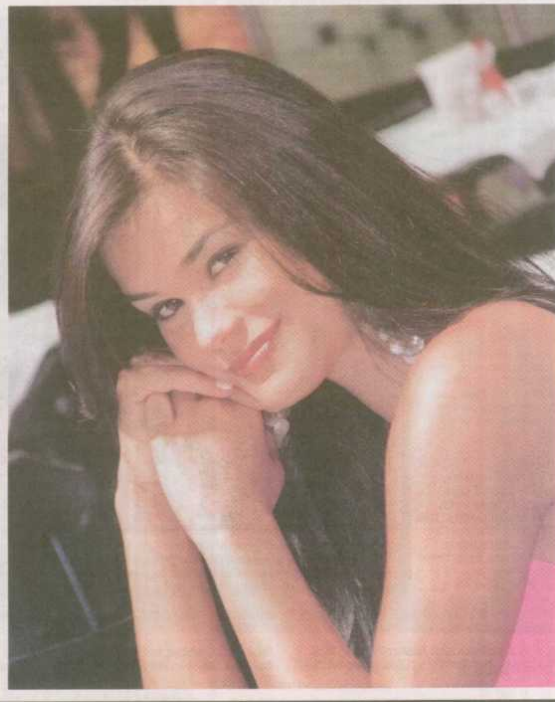
While they generally don't kill you UTIs can surely cause a lot of pain and burning sensation in your private parts. You know you have one when you feel a strong, persistent urge to release yourself, a burning sensation when doing it, passing frequent, small amounts of urine, blood in the urine (hematuria) or cloudy, strong-smelling urine and low grade fever.

Men do contract them, but women are the biggest victims. Approximately fifty percent of all women will have at least one UTI in her lifetime with many getting it repeatedly. Experts attribute it to several causes.

### FREQUENT SEX CAN UP YOUR RISK

While regular sex can keep your mood upbeat, beware, it might bring along with it lots of pain (literally) "Sexual intercourse is a common cause of UTIs in women because

# She fought till the end



in it. This increases the risk of such infections, allowing bacteria to reside for longer. After you've completed your business on the throne, always wipe from front to back. Doing so prevents bacteria in the anal region from spreading to the vagina or urinary tract.

Other factors that may also increase a woman's risk of developing UTI include pregnancy, having UTI as a child and menopause, diabetes, kidney stones and obstructions in the urinary tract.

### WHEN CAN IT BE DANGEROUS?

When germs travel up the tract and spread to the kidneys, symptoms like upper back and side pains, chills, fever, nausea and vomiting may occur. If the infection persists, it can lead to acute or chronic kidney infections which could permanently damage the kidneys. Children and older adults are at the greatest risk of kidney damage due to UTIs as their signs are often overlooked or mistaken for other conditions. A worst case scenario in this context (just as for any other infection) occurs when it is not promptly treated. The bacteria travel up the tract and spread all over the body, thereby causing sepsis, which cuts off the supply of oxygen to various organs of the body and leads to death.

### YOU CAN AVOID REPEATED INFECTIONS

Apart from a pelvic examination, a urine sample test can diagnose a UTI for which a week to ten days of antibiotics is the usual line of treatment. "Though symptoms may disappear soon after beginning medication, it should not be quit half-way as the infection may persist and recur. This is one of the primary reasons for recurrence of UTIs," says Dr Mala Srivastava, consultant gynecologist, Sir Gangaram hospital. It is a known fact that UTI tends to occur repeatedly in some women. "There is a 30 per cent probability that UTI could recur in a woman who has been infected once," says Dr Monika Mahajan, consultant, internal medicine, Max Superspeciality.

Doctors claim that most bacteria causing UTI tend to be multi-drug resistant and in cases of severe infections the diagnosis should be done through a urine culture. "This test pinpoints the exact bacteria causing the infection and avoids the long process of trial-and-error to figure out which antibiotic to prescribe," says Dr Mahajan. Another urine test is advised about a week after completing treatment to be sure the infection is cured.

### THE ROLE OF IMMUNITY

Though the chances of dying due to a UTI as Mariana did is quite remote, experts say that an underlying reason may be low immunity. "This model's immunity might have been definitely compromised. News reports also attribute this to a delay in diagnosing her case, but considering that she was a model, it could be possible that her diet may have been lacking, making her immunity low," says Dr Monika Mahajan. Drinking plenty of water, maintaining hygiene and a healthy diet play a great role in keeping such infections at bay. "A healthy diet comprising of fruits and vegetables are imperative in building the body's immunity. In the case of UTI drinking lots of water helps too," says clinical nutritionist Puja Tewari of Fortis hospital.

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### CRANBERRY JUICE

Scientists have discovered that cranberry juice can prevent UTI. The research published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) says that cranberries contain a natural compound that has an anti-stick mechanism which prevents the bacteria E. Coli (one of the bacteria causing UTI) from adhering to the body. These berries disable bacteria, so the 'bugs don't stick'.



of their anatomy. During sex, bacteria in the vaginal area are sometimes massaged into the opening of the urinary tract by the motion of the penis," says Dr Kapil Juneja, consultant urologist, Moolchand Medicity. This is why sexologists advise drinking plenty of water prior to sex and taking a leak after it. It helps wash out germs that might be surreptitiously lurking down there.

Also when you are dying to pee, just go ahead and do it quick. The bladder is a muscle that stretches to hold urine and contracts to release it. Waiting too long to urinate despite feeling the urge causes the bladder to stretch beyond its capacity which weakens its muscle. A weak bladder may not empty completely, leaving some urine