

Syphilis

Syphilis is a bacterial STI and can be passed on through skin-to-skin contact.

QUICK FACTS

- Syphilis is passed on through direct contact during oral, vaginal or anal sex with a person who has syphilis
- Symptoms vary based on the infection stage; there may be no symptoms at all
- Testing is usually by a swab from skin lesions and by blood tests
- It is curable, but if left untreated can lead to serious problems in the brain, heart and eyes
- Syphilis is treated using antibiotics

What is this?

Syphilis is a bacterial sexually transmissible infection.

How do you get it?

Syphilis is passed on by direct contact during oral, vaginal or anal sex with a person who has syphilis.

It is highly contagious when sores or rashes are present.

Syphilis can be transmitted from mother (or pregnant person) to baby during pregnancy.

What are the symptoms?

Not all people with syphilis have symptoms, so you may not know you have it unless you have a blood test.

There are four stages of syphilis infection. Symptoms vary depending on the infection stage. People with primary, secondary and early latent syphilis are infectious to their sexual partners.

Primary syphilis

- A hard, painless sore (ulcer) appears, usually on the genitals. This sore can also appear on other areas of sexual contact, such as the mouth, cervix or anus.

- You may not notice the sore, because it is usually painless and may appear on hidden parts of the body.
- The sore usually appears 3 - 4 weeks after infection, but can take longer, which may make it difficult to know when you became infected with syphilis.
- The sore usually heals by itself within about 4 weeks. Even though the sore heals, if you have not had treatment, you still have syphilis and can pass it on to others.
- Untreated primary syphilis may lead to *secondary syphilis*.

Secondary syphilis

- Symptoms may occur 2 - 4 months after initial syphilis infection and last several weeks.
- There may be a red skin rash on the back, chest, hands and feet.
- While the rash is present, syphilis is highly infectious.
- Other symptoms include fever, swelling of the glands in the groin and armpits, genital rashes, hair loss and general tiredness.
- If syphilis is not treated in the primary or secondary phase it becomes *latent syphilis*.

Latent syphilis

- At this stage there are no symptoms and syphilis can only be detected by blood test.
- There are usually no problems if syphilis is diagnosed and treated early in the latent stage.
- Latent syphilis is infectious within the first 12 - 24 months, after which time it becomes less infectious.
- If you have latent syphilis you may need further tests, specialist review and longer treatment.
- About a third of people who have untreated latent syphilis develop *tertiary syphilis*.

Tertiary syphilis

- Tertiary syphilis can cause serious health problems, mainly in the brain and heart.
- Syphilis is no longer infectious at this point and can still be treated.

How do you test for it?

Your doctor may suggest the diagnosis of syphilis based on the appearance of a genital sore or body rash.

They may do a swab test from sores and rashes to detect syphilis DNA (genetic material). They will also order blood tests. The blood tests measure antibodies - your body's response to infection. It can take 3 months to develop antibodies, so the tests may be negative early on.

One antibody test looks for syphilis infection and another looks for activity of infection. Blood tests are also used to monitor your body's response to treatment and may help work out how long you have had the infection.

If you are pregnant, a blood test should be done to check if you have syphilis. It is important to have this blood test to make sure that if you have syphilis you can be treated and will not pass syphilis on to your baby or cause complications in your pregnancy.

How is it treated?

Syphilis is treated with penicillin. If you are allergic to penicillin, there are alternative treatments.

Although the treatment is straightforward, it is important to have repeat blood tests to check that the treatment has worked. Follow up blood tests may be recommended at 3, 6 and 12 months after treatment.

After treatment with penicillin some people (particularly those who have early syphilis) have a flu-like illness for 24 hours. This includes fever, aches and pains and generally feeling unwell. These symptoms will go away and don't require any specific treatment, except plenty of rest and fluids.

You should not have sex until your rash or sore clears up and at least one week after treatment.

Are there any complications if not treated?

Left untreated, some people develop tertiary syphilis. This can happen 10 to 30 years after the initial infection.

Tertiary syphilis can cause serious health problems, mainly in the brain and heart.

Syphilis during pregnancy can cause problems for your baby, like miscarriage, premature birth, stillbirth and death after birth.

How can I protect myself?

Using condoms or dams during sex greatly reduces the risk of being infected with syphilis.

If you are pregnant, make sure you have the syphilis screening blood test in your first trimester.

Let them know

When you've been diagnosed with an STI like this, all of your sexual partners from the last few months should be checked by a doctor.

It is very important that **all** your sex partners (regular and casual) are checked because if STIs are not treated they may cause serious problems later on.

If you have difficulty telling your partners, you can use [Let Them Know](#) for sample conversations, emails, text messages and letters you can send to your partners either personally or anonymously.

Where can I get help?

- Visit a [sexual health service near you](#)
- Visit your local doctor
- Visit your local community health centre

DISCLAIMER

This fact sheet provides general sexual health information and is not intended to replace the need for a consultation with your doctor.

If you have concerns about your health, you should seek advice from your doctor.

If you require urgent care, you should go to your nearest Emergency Department or call [000](#).