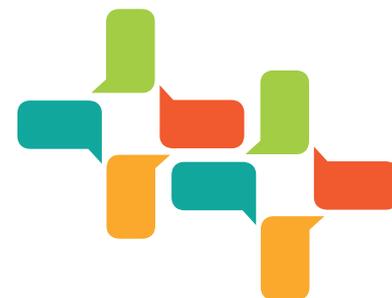


Fact Sheet

Syphilis



What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmissible bacterial infection that can cause serious health problems if not treated.

What are the symptoms?

There are four stages of syphilis infection: primary, secondary, latent and tertiary.

- *Primary syphilis* (10-90 days after infection): a painless sore (or sometimes multiple sores) called a 'chancre' appears in the mouth, anus, penis, vagina or cervix. It looks like a roundish area of broken skin that has an infected centre. It can be weepy, and have pus coming from it. The sore often goes unnoticed because it is usually painless and may be hidden from view (eg. in the rectum or on the cervix). This usually clears up after two to six weeks but the infection remains in your body.
- *Secondary syphilis* (7-10 weeks after infection): symptoms include a red rash on the palms, soles, chest or back, fever, enlarged glands in the armpits and groin, hair loss, headaches and tiredness. The rash is slightly lumpy, but not itchy or painful. Again the symptoms may go unnoticed in this stage.
- *Latent syphilis*: no noticeable symptoms, but the body is still infected. If syphilis is not treated at this stage it may remain latent (dormant) for life or it can develop into tertiary syphilis.
- *Tertiary syphilis*: develops in about one third of people with untreated latent syphilis. In this stage, the bacteria can damage almost any part of the body including the heart, brain, spinal cord, eyes and bones, resulting in mental illness, blindness, deafness, neurological problems, heart disease and even death. This can happen many years after the primary infection.

How could I get it?

Syphilis is usually transmitted through skin-to-skin contact during anal, oral or vaginal sex. Syphilis is highly infectious during the primary and secondary stages when the sore or rash is present. It can also be passed on during the early part of the latent phase. Some people

may not have any sores, but still pass on the infection. A pregnant woman with syphilis can pass the infection on to her baby before it is born, causing birth defects, seizures, developmental delay or miscarriage/stillbirth.

How can I prevent it?

You can help protect yourself from syphilis by using condoms, dams and gloves correctly when you have sex. For useful tips on using condoms, check out our factsheet. You should not have sex with anyone who has been diagnosed with syphilis or who has symptoms of syphilis, even using a condom, until after they have finished their treatment.

What happens in a syphilis test?

You can have a special blood test to check whether you have syphilis, or a sample from a syphilis sore can be examined under a microscope. Blood tests during pregnancy include syphilis tests to prevent the infection being passed on to the baby. You can be treated safely for syphilis while pregnant.

To find out where you can go for a sexual health check, call Talkline on 1300 65 88 86 to talk to a reproductive and sexual health nurse, or contact your local sexual health clinic. Talking to the Talkline nurse is confidential and anonymous.

Is there a cure?

Yes! Syphilis can be cured with antibiotics. Usually only one injection is required but the length of treatment depends on the stage of infection. You will need to have follow-up blood tests to make sure the infection is gone.

Telling others

It is important to tell your sexual partner(s) that you have syphilis so that they can be tested and treated. Your doctor can help you decide who may be at risk and help you to contact them. You should not have sex until your doctor tells you your treatment has been successful.

Syphilis is a notifiable disease. This means that doctors and laboratory staff are legally required to tell NSW Health about new cases. This information is confidential and is used for public health planning.

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For further information

- Contact the Family Planning NSW Talkline on 1300 658 886 or go to www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline
- NRS (for deaf) 133 677
- To view a full listing of NSW Sexual Health Services, call the NSW Sexual Health Information Line on 1800 451 624, or visit www.health.nsw.gov.au/publichealth/sexualhealth/sexual_phus.asp

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