

What You Should Know About Syphilis

Public Health Branch – Factsheet

What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is an infection caused by a bacteria that can lead to long-term complications if it is not treated correctly.

How is syphilis spread?

About 90 per cent of all syphilis is sexually transmitted, through direct contact with a syphilis sore during vaginal, anal or oral sex. Sores can be found on the penis, vagina, anus, in the rectum or on the lips and in the mouth.

Syphilis can also be spread from an infected mother to her unborn baby. Rarely, it can be spread through blood transfusion.

Am I at risk for syphilis?

Any sexually-active person can get syphilis through unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex.

How common is syphilis?

Syphilis is less common than other sexually transmitted infections such as gonorrhea and chlamydia. An increase in the number of infectious syphilis cases was observed in certain areas in Manitoba in 2013.

Who should be tested for syphilis?

You should get tested regularly for syphilis if you are pregnant, are a man who has sex with men, have a HIV infection, have confirmed or suspected sexually transmitted infections, have had unprotected sex with casual or anonymous partners and/or have partner(s) who have tested positive for syphilis.

Can syphilis be cured?

Yes, syphilis can be cured with the right antibiotics, which are free of charge from your health care provider. However, treatment will not undo any damage the infection has already caused.

I've been treated. Can I get syphilis again?

Yes. Having syphilis once does not protect you from getting it again. Even after you've been successfully treated, you can still be re-infected. Only laboratory tests can confirm whether you have syphilis. Follow-up testing by your health care provider is recommended to make sure your treatment was successful.

Because syphilis sores can be hidden in the vagina, anus, under the foreskin of the penis or in the mouth, it may not be obvious that you or a sex partner has syphilis. Unless you know your status for certain or that your sex partner(s) has been tested and treated, you may be at risk of spreading or getting syphilis again.

How can syphilis be prevented?

If you are sexually active, you can do the following things to lower your chances of getting syphilis:

- Correctly use condoms every time you have sex. Condoms prevent transmission of syphilis by preventing contact with a sore. Sometimes sores occur in areas not covered by a condom. Contact with these sores can still transmit syphilis.
- Make sure you and your sexual partner(s) are regularly tested for syphilis.
- Avoid alcohol and drug use that may lead to risky sexual behaviour.
- Avoid sexual activity.

Do not have sex and see your doctor immediately if you have a sore or rash, particularly in the groin area and/or have an unusual discharge from your penis or your vagina.

How will my doctor know if I have syphilis?

Most of the time, a blood test can be used to test for syphilis.

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How do I know if I have syphilis?

Symptoms of syphilis in adults can be divided into stages:

Primary Stage

Primary syphilis most often occurs as a single painless sore that develops at the site where syphilis entered the body. Because the sore is painless, it can easily go unnoticed.

The sore can last from three to 90 days and often heals with or without treatment. Even though the sore goes away, the treatment should be taken, so the infection does not move to the secondary stage.

Secondary Stage

The most common feature of this stage is a skin rash, which occurs in about 90 per cent of cases. The rash can appear anywhere, including on the palms of hands and/or the bottoms of feet. The rash is sometimes so faint that it won't be noticed.

Other symptoms can include fever, swollen lymph glands, a sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches and feeling very tired. The symptoms from this stage will go away with or without treatment but like in primary stage, treatment should be taken to prevent late stages of syphilis.

Latent and Late Stages

The latent stage of syphilis begins when all of the earlier symptoms disappear. With no proper and early treatment, the body can continue to have syphilis for years without any signs or symptoms.

Most people with untreated syphilis do not develop late stage syphilis. However, when it does happen it is very serious and would occur 10 to 30 years after the infection began.

Syphilis can invade the nervous system at any stage of infection, and causes a wide range of symptoms varying from no symptoms at all, to headache, changed behavior and movement problems. This invasion of the nervous system is called "neurosyphilis". Also, syphilis can damage the internal organs such as the heart and arteries. This damage can result in death.

What is the link between syphilis and HIV?

Syphilis genital sores make it easier to transmit and acquire HIV infection sexually. In HIV-positive people, syphilis can cause damage faster and be harder to treat than in HIV-negative people.

What is the treatment for syphilis?

Syphilis is easy to cure in its early stages. A single intramuscular injection of penicillin, an antibiotic, will cure a person who has had syphilis for less than a year. Additional doses are needed to treat someone who has had syphilis for longer than a year. For people who are allergic to penicillin, other antibiotics are available to treat syphilis.

Persons who receive syphilis treatment must not have sex with others until the syphilis sores are completely healed and laboratory tests show they do not have syphilis. Persons with syphilis must notify their sex partners so that they also can be tested and receive treatment if necessary.

Where can I go to get more information?

For more information and/or if you have any questions:

- contact your physician or local public health office
- call Health Links – Info Santé at 204-788-8200 in Winnipeg or toll-free outside of Winnipeg at 1-888-315-9257
- visit www.gov.mb.ca/health
- visit www.syphilismb.com
- visit www.sexualityandu.ca