

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a bacteria. If untreated, it can cause serious irreversible damage. Syphilis is not common in Australia but is increasing in men who have sex with men and some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

How do you get syphilis?

Syphilis is usually passed on through unprotected skin-to-skin contact during anal, oral or vaginal sex. Syphilis is highly infectious during the primary and secondary stages when there is a sore or rash. It can also be passed on during the early part of the latent phase when there are no sores. A pregnant woman with syphilis can pass the infection on to her baby through the placenta before it is born, causing birth defects, seizures, developmental delay or miscarriage and stillbirth.

How can I protect myself from syphilis?

The best way to prevent getting syphilis and other STIs is to have safer sex. This means using a condom every time you have sex.

- use a condom when you have vaginal, oral or anal sex.
- wash your hands immediately after sex and avoid hand-to-eye contact
- don't have sex with someone who knows they have syphilis, even with a condom, until after they have completed their treatment

What are the symptoms of syphilis infection?

The symptoms of syphilis will depend on the stage of infection. Some people may not have any symptoms at all. 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 (e.g. in the rectum or on the cervix).
- the sores usually clear up after 2 to 6 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
- the symptoms may go unnoticed

Latent syphilis

- no noticeable symptoms, but the body still has the infection
- 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 do I get tested for syphilis?

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. Routine blood tests during pregnancy also include syphilis tests to prevent the infection being passed on to the baby. You can be treated safely for syphilis while pregnant.

How is syphilis treated?

Syphilis can be easily treated with an injection of antibiotics. 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. You should not have sex, even with a condom, until your doctor tells you your treatment has been successful. The sooner you seek treatment for syphilis the better. Treatment is also recommended if you have been in contact with someone who has tested positive to syphilis.

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 service planning.

What is contact tracing?

Your doctor will explain who needs to be contacted and treated if you have a syphilis infection and can also help you with contact tracing. If you have syphilis and have unprotected sex you can pass the infection on to your partner. It is important to let your sexual partners know if you have syphilis so that they can also get tested and treated. Contact tracing can be done confidentially. There are websites that let you send a free anonymous text message or email – just ask your doctor or nurse about it.

For more information

Family Planning NSW Talkline –

www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline or 1300 658 886

National Relay Service (for deaf people) –

13 36 77

TIS National's interpreting service –

131 450

Visit your nearest Family Planning NSW clinic –

www.fpnsw.org.au/clinics

NSW Sexual Health Infolink –

www.shil.nsw.gov.au or 1800 451 624

Let Them Know –

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