



Factsheet: Syphilis

What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial infection. It is a common and curable STI.

How is it transmitted?

The bacteria enters the body through mucous membranes or cuts or tears on the skin, and can be transmitted through:

- Unprotected vaginal, anal and oral sex.
- Unprotected rimming (mouth to anus contact).
- Intimate/close genital and skin to skin contact (through direct contact with a syphilis sore or rash). The exchange of body fluids does not need to occur.
- Mother to Child transmission can occur during pregnancy or during childbirth.

What are the symptoms?

A person can have Syphilis and not have any symptoms.

There are three stages associated with *untreated* syphilis infection, each with its own signs and symptoms.

Stage 1 - Primary Syphilis

- The appearance of a painless ulcer-like sore, known as a '*chancre*' – this can appear anytime between 10 to 90 days after contact with the bacteria at the site of infection.
- Chancres may be found: outside the genitals, including the penis, scrotum and vagina; inside the vagina or rectum; in or around the anus; or, on the lips or in the mouth.
- The sore can last from one to five weeks and will usually go away by itself.

Stage 2 - Secondary Syphilis

- The secondary stage of syphilis can develop 17 days to 6½ months after infection.
- Symptoms can last from 2 to 6 weeks.
- Symptoms can include: a rash that appears on the palms of your hands or the soles of your feet, which normally does not itch; a rash on other parts of the body; patchy loss of hair on the head and other parts of the body; fever, headaches, muscle aches, or a general sense of ill health.
- Symptoms of secondary syphilis will usually clear up by itself without treatment, but the infection will still be present.



Stage 3 - Latent and Tertiary Syphilis

- After stage 2, if the infection remains untreated, syphilis becomes dormant (hidden). There may be no signs or symptoms for many years.
- If a person has syphilis for more than two years, it can no longer be passed on, but if it is left untreated, the infection can severely damage a person's health. Complications during this stage can include:
 - tumours on the skin, bones, liver or any other organ;
 - heart, lung and brain problems;
 - chronic nervous system disorders, such as blindness, insanity and paralysis.
- A relapse of secondary syphilis can occur once the infection has entered the latent stage.
- A sexually active person (with latent syphilis) can become re-infected with syphilis and this can be passed on.
- Treatment at this phase will cure the disease and stop future damage to the body; it cannot repair or reverse the damage that occurred before treatment.

The Syphilis Test

The test for Syphilis involves a blood test. If a person has a visible ulcer or sore, a swab test is conducted.

How is it treated?

The preferred treatment for syphilis is penicillin. For those allergic to penicillin, another antibiotic can be suggested by the healthcare provider.

Prevention

- When sexually active, always use condoms and/or dental dams for vaginal, anal and oral sex, and for rimming.
- Get tested, and treated if required.
- Do not share sex toys, [or if toys are shared, use condoms on the sex toy, change the condom between people, remove it after use, and thoroughly clean the toy before using it again].
- When using fingers or hands for penetration (anally and/or vaginally), use latex gloves or finger cots, particularly if there are visible cuts or broken skin on the hands, and do not share fingers (i.e. do not use fingers on yourself that you have already used on your partner where infected fluids could be passed on).
- Make informed decisions: talk to sexual partner(s) about STI testing and using condoms, and get informed about the risks.
- Mutual monogamy (both partners test for STIs and don't have any, and both partners agree to only have sex with each other, and keep it that way!).

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