

Syphilis

Syphilis is a sexually transmissible infection (STI) caused by the bacteria *Treponema pallidum*.

What are the symptoms of syphilis?

Not all people with syphilis will have symptoms so getting tested is very important.

Syphilis has several stages of infection known as primary, secondary, latent and tertiary syphilis.

Each stage of syphilis can cause different symptoms.

Primary syphilis is the first stage of the infection. Symptoms include a painless sore (or sores) usually on the genitals, mouth or anus. Sores can look like shallow ulcers, but as they are often painless you may not notice them. A sore will heal by itself, but without treatment syphilis infection will still be present in the body and can cause complications and be spread to others.

Secondary syphilis is the second stage of the infection and symptoms include:

- a rash on the back, chest, limbs, hands and feet
- white patches on moist parts of the body (including the mouth)
- fever and headache
- 'flu-like' symptoms
- swollen lymph nodes

If not treated, these symptoms may come and go for up to 2 years. Syphilis can be spread to others during this stage.

Latent syphilis occurs when the infection is left untreated and remains in the body

- there are usually no symptoms
- latent syphilis is usually not infectious
- infection can only be detected on a blood test
- if latent syphilis is treated there are usually no problems

Without treatment people with latent syphilis may eventually develop tertiary syphilis which occurs many years after initial infection. Tertiary syphilis can cause serious damage to the heart, brain, eyes and other organs.

How did I get infected with syphilis?

Syphilis is usually contracted during vaginal, anal or oral sex without a condom with someone who has the infection. It can also be transmitted from mother to baby during pregnancy which is why syphilis testing is part of routine antenatal care. .

How is syphilis diagnosed?

A blood test will detect both current and past infection with syphilis. If a sore is present a swab can also be taken to diagnose syphilis.

What is the treatment for syphilis?

Penicillin injections (usually given into the buttocks) are the treatment for syphilis. If you are allergic to penicillin there are alternative treatments.

Some people may experience sudden flu-like symptoms (fevers, chills, aches and pains) 6-8 hours after treatment. These symptoms are due to the bacteria responding to the treatment and your body's immune response. They are not a side effect or allergic reaction to penicillin. Symptoms will settle quickly and do not require any treatment other than reassurance, rest and paracetamol.

Do I have to tell my partners?

Yes. It is very important to tell your sex partner(s) that you have been diagnosed with syphilis so they can be tested and possibly treated as well. Your health care provider can help you work out who you need to tell and how to tell them.

Do I need further tests after I have been treated?

Yes. You will need to return for further blood tests to make sure that treatment has been effective. You should also have a check for other STI and blood borne viruses.

How do I avoid getting infected again?

- make sure that your current sexual partner(s) are tested and treated.
- always using a condom is the best way to prevent future infection, unless you and your partner have both been tested and neither of you have other partners.

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Melbourne Sexual Health Centre (2012) Syphilis Factsheet. www.mshc.org.au

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<http://www.uptodate.com/contents/syphilis-the-basics>