

Fact Sheet

Syphilis

What is syphilis?

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

How do you get syphilis?

Individuals that have more than one sexual partner increase their risk of getting a STI. An individual who has unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex may get syphilis. A pregnant woman who is infected with an STI can pass on the infection to her baby while it is in the womb and the infection may harm their baby.

What are the symptoms of syphilis?

The early stages of syphilis show symptoms (see primary stage below), however as the infection develops symptoms may disappear. This does not mean the infection is gone. Even if the symptoms go away it is important that you be tested and treated. Individuals can still spread the infection even though you don't show any symptoms. Below is a description of the different stages of a syphilis infection and how it develops over time:

- Primary stage - this is the stage when the bacteria first enters the body. A painless sore (chancre) usually appears within 3 to 90 days after sexual contact with an infected person. Many people do not notice the sore because it is painless. Often the sore will heal without treatment, but this does not mean the infection is gone. Without treatment the infection will move into the secondary stage;
- Secondary stage – usually occurs 2 weeks to 6 months after the sore (chancre). A rash may develop anywhere on the body. The most common spots for the rash to appear are on the palms of the hands and the bottom (soles) of the feet;
- Latent stage - can last for over 20 years - the rash disappears without treatment and there are no more symptoms. Without proper treatment, the bacteria will continue to spread throughout your body;
- Tertiary stage - the bacteria has spread and can cause damage to the different areas of the body. These areas can include the heart, brain and other important organs. In some cases the spread of bacteria can lead to death.

How do you know you have syphilis?

A blood test is used to diagnose syphilis. If you think you have been infected, you should visit your community health centre and speak to a doctor or nurse, and ask for a blood test.

What is the treatment for syphilis?

Syphilis can be treated at any stage with antibiotics. It is important that syphilis be treated as early as possible. Antibiotics cannot repair any damage caused in the latent stage.

The treatment period for syphilis is 2 weeks. and followed-up with a blood test. The blood test will confirm the treatment worked. It is important the individual who is being treated not have sex until the full treatment period is done and final blood test results are given.

What other tests should be done?

Individuals should be tested for other STIs including: Chlamydia, Gonorrhoea and HIV. If you have an untreated STI like syphilis, it is easier for you to get HIV. It is possible to have more than one infection at a time, so it is important to get tested for other STIs.

What about sexual partners?

All sexual partners need to be tested and treated if they are infected.

- Primary stage, tell partners within the past 3 months.
- Secondary stage, tell partners within the past 6 months.
- Latent and tertiary stage, tell partners within the past year and long-term partners. Children may also need to be tested.

Visit (<http://www.irespectmyself.ca>) to learn more about sexual health and relationships.

