

# Syphilis

## What is it?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that is caused by a bacteria. It can cause serious damage to the body if not treated.

Syphilis is not common in NSW, but it is increasing in men who have sex with men.

## Are there any symptoms?

Symptoms of syphilis can be hidden.

There are four stages of syphilis:

1. **Primary syphilis** (9 to 90 days after infection). A sore appears in the mouth, genital or bottom areas. You may not know the sore is there because it is not painful. You also may not be able to see it (inside genitals). Sores generally go away after 2 to 6 weeks.

2. **Secondary syphilis** (7 to 10 weeks after infection). You may not notice these symptoms.

They can be:

- Red rash on hands, back, chest or feet.
- High temperature
- Swollen glands
- Hair loss
- Tiredness.

3. **Latent syphilis**: You won't notice the symptoms at this stage but the infection is still there and can stay with you for life harming your body. If syphilis stays there without treatment for more than 10 years, it can progress to more severe disease

4. **Tertiary syphilis**: This happens in about 1 out of 3 people who have not treated latent syphilis. In this stage, the bacteria can damage almost any part of the body including the heart, brain, spinal cord, eyes and bones. The damage can cause in this stage can lead to many different problems. Mental illness, blindness, deafness, brain problems, heart disease and death.

Syphilis can cause birth defects and miscarriage.

## How did I get it?

Usually through skin-to-skin contact during any kind of sex. Syphilis is very infectious during the primary and secondary stage. These are the stages where the sore, rashes and ulcers are present. Syphilis can be passed on during pregnancy from a mother to her unborn baby, and this can occur at any stage of syphilis infection.

## How can I make sure I don't get it?

Do not have sex, even using condoms, with someone who has syphilis or thinks they might. It is safest to wait until they have been tested and treated for syphilis before having sex.

Once the infection has cleared always use a condom when having sex.

Have regular STI/HIV checks – doing this stops STIs from causing serious health issues. It also helps stop the spread of STIs to others.

### **How can the nurse/ Doctor tell me if I have it?**

If you have a sore, a doctor can take a swab (using a cotton bud) and test it.

A doctor can also take a blood test to look for antibodies. Antibodies are what the body produces to fight infection. These antibodies can take 3months to show up in the blood. This means tests before 3months could be negative until the antibodies have developed. A positive test shows that you have either a current or past infection. You will need more tests to tell if the infection is still active.

You can be re-infected even after treatment if you are exposed to syphilis again.

During pregnancy a syphilis test is taken to prevent infection of unborn babies.

### **How can I get rid of it?**

Syphilis is treated with penicillin injections or tablets. The length of treatment depends on the stage of infection. You usually need blood tests after the treatment to check it's completely gone.

### **Who do I need to tell and why?**

It's important to tell people you have had sex with about syphilis. They will need to be tested and treated. Ask your doctor if you aren't sure who you need to tell. They can help you with this.

This fact sheet is just some general information. If you are worried about your health go and see a doctor.