

*Syphilis is a sexually transmissible infection that can be treated and cured with antibiotics. If it is not treated, it can affect the brain, spinal cord and other organs. Condoms can prevent transmission.*

## Syphilis

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### What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmissible infection caused by bacteria. If it is not treated, syphilis can cause serious, irreversible damage.

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

### Are there any symptoms?

The symptoms of syphilis often go unnoticed.

There are four stages of syphilis: primary, secondary, latent and tertiary. Each stage has its own set of symptoms.

1. **Primary syphilis** (ten to ninety days after infection)

In this stage, a sore or ulcer appears in the mouth, anus, penis, vagina or cervix. The sore often goes unnoticed because it is usually painless; may be hidden from view (for example, in the rectum or on the cervix) and it clears up after two to six weeks.

2. **Secondary syphilis** (seven to ten weeks after infection)

Symptoms in the secondary stage of syphilis may also go unnoticed. If symptoms are noticed they may include:

- a red rash on the hands, back, chest or feet (this rash is very infectious)
- fever
- swelling of glands in the groin and armpits
- hair loss
- general tiredness

3. **Latent syphilis**

This stage has no noticeable symptoms, but the body is still infected. If syphilis is not treated at this stage it may remain latent (dormant) for life or it can develop into tertiary syphilis.

4. **Tertiary syphilis**

Tertiary syphilis develops in about one third of all 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. This damage can happen years or even decades after the primary stage. Tertiary syphilis can result in mental illness, blindness, deafness, neurological problems, heart disease and death.

Syphilis can cause birth defects and even death in an unborn baby.

### How is it transmitted?

Syphilis is usually transmitted through skin-to-skin contact during anal, oral or vaginal sex. Syphilis is highly infectious during the primary and secondary stages when the sore or rash is there. More rarely, syphilis is transmitted during pregnancy from a mother to her unborn baby.

### How is it prevented?

Go for a regular sexually transmissible infection (STI) check-up to find infections before complications develop and to prevent transmission to others. Always use condoms.

Using condoms and water based lubricant can significantly reduce the risk of transmission of syphilis and other sexually transmissible infections.

Do not have sex with anyone who has been diagnosed with syphilis or symptoms of syphilis, even using a condom, until after they have finished their treatment.

### How is it diagnosed?

A blood test is needed to diagnose the infection. If a sore is there during primary infection a doctor can take a swab (using a cotton bud) and test it. Whether a sore is there or not, a doctor can take a blood test for syphilis antibodies. Antibodies can take between three and six months to develop in the blood, so the first tests could be negative. As the initial blood test detects the antibodies that the body produces to combat infection, a positive test indicates that you have either a current or past infection. Other tests will be necessary to determine if the infection is still active. Re-infection can also occur even after treatment.

Pregnant women are always tested for syphilis to prevent infection of unborn babies.

### How is it treated?

Syphilis is easily treated with penicillin injections or tablets. The length of treatment depends on the stage of infection. You might need follow-up blood tests to check that your treatment has worked.

### Telling partners

If you have syphilis, you should not have sex until after your doctor tells you that your treatment has been successful. It is important to tell your sexual partner so they can be tested and treated. Your doctor can help you to decide who may be at risk and help you to contact them.

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 planning.

The information in this fact sheet is general and you should see a doctor if you are worried about your health.

### Contact

NSW Sexual Health Infoline freecall **1800 451 624**.