



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. This is why getting tested is very important.

Syphilis has several stages of infection - primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary. Each stage can cause different symptoms.

Primary syphilis is the first stage of the infection. It may present as a painless sore (or sores) usually on your 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, however without treatment the syphilis infection will still be in your body. It can cause problems and you can still spread the infection to others.

Secondary syphilis is the second stage of the infection. Symptoms include:

- a rash on your back, chest, limbs, hands and feet
- white patches on moist parts of your body (such as your mouth, groin, and underarms)
- fever (temperature above 38°C)
- 'flu-like' symptoms (fever, chills, aches and pains)
- swollen lymph nodes
- headache

If you don't have treatment, these symptoms may come and go for up to 2 years. You can spread syphilis to others during this stage.

Latent syphilis happens when the infection is left untreated and stays in your body:

- There are usually no symptoms.
- It is usually not infectious, meaning it is unlikely you will give it to someone else.
- Infection can only be found by having on a blood test.
- If treated there are usually no ongoing problems.

Without treatment, people with latent syphilis may eventually develop **tertiary syphilis** which can happen many years after they are first infected. Tertiary syphilis can cause serious damage to your heart, brain, eyes and other organs.

How did I get infected with syphilis?

Syphilis is usually passed on through contact during vaginal, anal or oral sex without a condom with someone who has the infection. It can also be passed to your baby during pregnancy. Syphilis testing is part of routine pregnancy care.

How is syphilis diagnosed?

A blood test will be able to tell whether you have a current and/or past syphilis infection. If you have a sore, a swab can also be taken and tested 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 other treatments you can have.

Some people may have sudden flu-like symptoms (fevers, chills, aches and pains) between 6 and 8 hours after treatment. This is because the bacteria and your immune system is responding to the treatment. These are not side effects or an allergic reaction to penicillin. Symptoms will settle quickly and do not need any treatment other than reassurance, rest and paracetamol.

Do I have to tell my partner(s)?

Yes. It is very important to tell your sex partner(s) that you have been diagnosed with syphilis. 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 more tests after I have been treated?

Yes. You will need to have more blood tests to make sure the treatment has worked. 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 becoming infected again. This may not be necessary if you and your partner have both been tested and neither of you have other partners.

If you need more information or have any questions, please contact the Canberra Sexual Health Clinic on (02) 5124 2184.

References:

Victorian Sexual Health Network (2020) Syphilis. <https://www.staystifree.org.au/get-the-facts/syphilis>

Up-to-date (2016) Patient Information: Syphilis (The Basics). <http://www.uptodate.com/contents/syphilis-the-basics>

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