

Syphilis

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI). It is quite easy to catch and can cause serious problems if you don't get it treated. It has been increasing in New Zealand particularly in men having sex with men (MSM). Having untreated syphilis increases your chances of catching HIV infection.

How does someone get syphilis?

Syphilis is usually caught by having sexual contact with an infected person. This may include vaginal, anal or oral sex or just close skin-to-skin contact. The chances of catching syphilis are lower if you use condoms during sex. Syphilis can also be spread from mother to baby during pregnancy if the mother is infected. Syphilis can cause miscarriage or still-birth or infection in the baby if a pregnant woman is not treated.

How do I know if I have syphilis?

- **About 50% of people don't have any symptoms and would not know without having a blood test.**
- **People without symptoms can still get problems later on if they are not treated.**
- **At the infectious stage people without symptoms can still pass the infection to their sexual contacts.**

What are the symptoms of syphilis?

Early stages of syphilis (primary and secondary syphilis) are also called infectious syphilis.

Primary syphilis

- The first sign of syphilis is one or more sores on the penis, anus, mouth or cervix (neck of the womb).
- The sore may not be seen easily at these sites and because it is often painless it may go unnoticed.
- The sore will disappear on its own within a few weeks.
- **All genital sores must be examined by a doctor.**

Secondary syphilis

- The most common symptom of secondary syphilis is a rash.
- It may affect the palms of the hands or soles of the feet. It can be very mild or severe and will disappear on its own.
- There may also be other symptoms such as mouth ulcers, headaches, swollen glands, fever, hair loss, tiredness, or warty growths in the genitals or anus.

If untreated, the symptoms of primary and secondary syphilis disappear, but you can remain infectious for up to 2 years.

Late syphilis

- If not treated, a small number of people will get late stage syphilis (or tertiary syphilis), which can cause damage to the heart, brain, nerves, blood vessels, liver, bones and joints many years later.
- People with late syphilis (latent and tertiary) are not infectious to sexual contacts.

How do I get tested?

You need to see your doctor or nurse or sexual health clinic for a check-up. If you want, take along someone you trust, for support.

- Syphilis is usually diagnosed by a blood test.
- The tests can take up to 3 months after you get the infection to become positive.
- It may be negative if you test too soon, but treatment is usually recommended if you have had sexual contact with someone with syphilis, even if the test is negative.
- If you have symptoms, you may also need to have samples taken from the sores or body rash.
- Syphilis is one of the routine blood tests in pregnant women.

How do I get treated?

- You will need injections of an antibiotic called penicillin.
- If you are allergic to penicillin other antibiotics will be used.
- **Proper treatment of the mother during pregnancy will prevent the baby being born with syphilis.**
- **The blood tests can stay positive for months or years after the disease has been successfully treated, but this is nothing to worry about and does not mean that you are still infectious.**

Important advice

- You must finish all the treatment to be cured.
- If you have syphilis you will need to tell sexual contacts to get tested and treated.
- The doctor or nurse will tell you how far back to notify sexual contacts – usually anyone in the last 3 to 6 months.
- Do not have sex until any sores or rashes have completely gone away.
- After treatment, follow-up blood tests are essential for at least one year to make sure cure is complete.
- It is possible to get reinfected with syphilis again in the future, through sexual contact with someone who has syphilis.

PATIENT INFORMATION

Important information

- Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection that is easily treated with antibiotics.
- It is most commonly diagnosed in men who have sex with men, but heterosexual infections are increasing.
- Many people with syphilis don't have symptoms.
- You get syphilis by having sexual contact, including oral sex, with another person with syphilis.
- Testing: You need a blood test, especially if you have a genital sore, a rash, or if you have had sexual contact with a person with syphilis.
- Condoms help prevent syphilis.
- You should avoid sex until any sores or rashes have completely gone.
- You will need follow-up blood tests.

The Ministry of Health supports the use of these clinical guidelines, developed by clinical experts and professional associations to guide clinical care.

This patient information leaflet has been produced by NZSHS. Every effort has been taken to ensure that the information in this leaflet is correct at the time of publishing (September 2017).