

SYPHILIS

What is it?

Syphilis is the oldest known sexually transmitted infection (STI). It is caused by a bacteria and is spread by vaginal, oral or anal sex. Syphilis can take from 3 days to 3 months for symptoms to show and some people may never have any noticeable symptoms. People infected with syphilis can spread it to others, even if they have no signs or symptoms of the infection.

What are the signs and symptoms?

There are 3 stages of syphilis:

Primary: The first symptom is a painless sore, called a chancre, on the penis, anus, labia, vagina, cervix, throat or lips. It is easy to miss as it heals and disappears in 1-5 weeks. There might also be swollen glands. Syphilis can be passed to others at this time through sexual contact.

Secondary: Two to 12 weeks later, a rash can appear all over the body, including the palms of the hands and the bottoms of the feet. This rash is easy to confuse with other skin problems. Sores can be in the mouth and the genital area. There can also be fever, swollen glands, sore throat, tiredness, headaches and patchy hair loss. Syphilis can be passed to others at this time also. These symptoms also go away, even without treatment, but the infection is still in the blood and other parts of the body.

Latent: In untreated syphilis, the bacteria will continue to spread to all parts of the body but there are no symptoms you can see. There is a smaller chance of spreading the disease during this stage. A blood test will show the infection is still there. Years after the primary infection, serious damage may show in body organs such as the heart, large blood vessels, bones, joints, or central nervous system. Early latent syphilis is considered infectious as there is a 25% chance it can change back to the secondary stage.

How is it diagnosed?

In early syphilis, if a sore is seen, the doctor will take a swab from the sore. The disease will show in a blood test about 1 month after the chancre appears. Blood tests also show if the treatment worked. When getting tested for syphilis, it is also important to be tested for HIV and other STIs.

How is syphilis treated?

Syphilis is best treated early to prevent serious problems and prevent the spread to other people. Penicillin injections are used most often and it is important to complete the treatment. Treatment will cure syphilis but cannot undo any damage already done to body organs. After treatment, blood tests will show that the disease has been cured and that there is no re-infection. Once you have had syphilis, it may show in your bloodwork forever, even though you can no longer pass it to sexual contacts.

Are there complications?

With early treatment of syphilis, there should be no problems later in life. With late or no treatment at all, there can be serious damage to the heart, large blood vessels, liver and brain.

All pregnant women should be tested for syphilis when receiving prenatal care from their doctor or other health care provider. If not treated, a pregnant woman can pass syphilis to her unborn child. This can cause serious damage to the baby.

How is syphilis prevented?

- Never have sexual contact with anyone who has a sore(s) in the genital area.
- Use condoms/latex barriers every time.
- Tell all your sexual partners and have them tested and treated as soon as possible. Do not have sex, even with a condom/latex barrier, until your doctor says all blood tests are okay.

Use condoms/latex barriers to help prevent the spread of STIs, HIV and hepatitis B.

For information call
Peel Public Health 905-799-7700
and ask for Sexual Health Information
or visit
peelsexualhealth.ca intheknowpeel.ca
peelregion.ca/health