

SYPHILIS FACT SHEET

What is Syphilis?

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.

How do I know if I have syphilis?

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. This sore usually shows up 3 weeks after being exposed, but it can take up to 3 months to appear. Many people do not see this sore, and it will go away on its own. There might also be swollen glands in your neck and groin.

Secondary: Two to 12 weeks later, a rash can appear anywhere on 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. 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.

Early latent syphilis is considered infectious as there is a 25% chance it can change back to the secondary stage. After 1 year of having the syphilis infection, a person is very unlikely to pass it on to their sexual partners.

How is it diagnosed?

Syphilis is usually diagnosed with a blood test. It can take up to 3 months for syphilis to show up in the blood after being exposed. If a sore is seen, the doctor will take a swab from the sore. When getting tested for syphilis, it is also important to be tested for HIV and other STIs.

Is there treatment or follow up for syphilis?

Syphilis is best treated early to avoid serious problems and prevent the spread to other people. Penicillin injections are used most often and it is important to complete the treatment and have follow-up blood work. 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.

For further information, talk to your health care professional or call Peel Public Health at 905-799-7700.

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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.

Syphilis, as with other sexually transmitted infections, increases the risk of HIV transmission.

Can syphilis be prevented?

- Use condoms/latex barriers for vaginal, anal and oral sex.
- Never have sexual contact with anyone who has a sore(s) in the genital area.
- Tell all your sexual partners and have them tested and treated as soon as possible.
- Your health care provider will tell you when it is safe to have sex again.
- Use a condom/latex barrier until your doctor says the blood tests show that the infection is cured.

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

For further information, talk to your health care professional or call Peel Public Health at 905-799-7700.