

# Syphilis

## What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by bacteria. If not treated, syphilis can cause serious damage within the body.

## Symptoms of Syphilis

Symptoms may appear 10 to 90 days after sexual contact with an infected person. Many people infected with syphilis do not have symptoms that they notice. They can unknowingly pass the infection on to their sexual partner(s).

The disease progresses through four stages

### Stage 1

**Primary Syphilis:** About three weeks after exposure, the person develops a painless open sore called a chancre, usually around the genitals or mouth.

### Stage 2

**Secondary Syphilis:** This stage occurs two to twelve weeks later. Flu-like symptoms develop and a rash (which may or may not be itchy) appears on the palms of hands, soles of the feet or the entire body.

Both the first and second stages of syphilis are highly infectious. The symptoms may go unnoticed. These two stages together may last up to one year.

### Stage 3

**Latent Syphilis:** This stage has no symptoms. The person with latent syphilis is not infectious to others. Even without treatment, the symptoms go away but the disease remains and can progress over several years.

### Stage 4

**Tertiary Syphilis:** If the syphilis infection remains untreated, the person may no longer be infectious, but the bacteria can reactivate, multiply and spread throughout the body. One third of untreated cases will go on to develop tertiary syphilis. In this stage, serious health problems involving the heart, brain, nerves, bones, eyes, joints, or even death can occur.

## How Syphilis spreads

- syphilis is usually spread during direct oral, anal or vaginal sexual contact with the sores and rashes of an infected person
- drug users who share needles can get syphilis because of the blood in the used needles

For further information, please call:  
**York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653**  
 TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit [www.york.ca](http://www.york.ca)



- a pregnant woman with untreated syphilis can give the infection to her baby before birth

## Syphilis during pregnancy

There is no cure for HIV or AIDS at this time. The virus remains in the body for life. There are drugs that can slow the progress of HIV and can help those infected to live full and active lives. There are also drugs available to treat the infections and cancers associated with AIDS.

## Diagnosing Syphilis

Syphilis may be diagnosed by a physical examination, blood tests and a medical history. Testing can be done six weeks after a possible exposure, or one to four weeks after the appearance of a chancre.

## Treating Syphilis

Syphilis is treated with antibiotics. The medication of choice is Benzathine Penicillin G. Early treatment is important.

## What about sexual partners?

It is important that all sexual and needle-sharing partners be checked, tested and treated for syphilis if needed. Your Public Health Nurse can help you to notify your partner(s). Your name will be kept confidential.

## Is follow-up important?

Follow-up blood tests for syphilis are extremely important. The results of the blood tests will show if your treatment has worked. Your health care provider will let you know when to return for the blood tests. Your blood test may remain positive after adequate treatment, but it does not mean you still have an active infection. Your health care provider can explain your blood test results to you.

### Remember:

- complete treatment as prescribed by your health care provider. Your health care provider will inform you when you are no longer able to pass the infection to partner(s)
- do not have oral, vaginal or anal sex or any direct contact with the chancre or rashes
- you can get reinfected every time you have sex with an untreated partner
- do not share needles
- pregnant women should have a blood test for syphilis
- use condoms to lower the chance of getting STIs and to prevent pregnancy
- it is possible to have more than one infection at a time, so it is important to be tested for other STIs

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