

# SYPHILIS

## WHAT IS SYPHILIS?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a bacteria called *Treponema pallidum*.

### SYMPTOMS

Symptoms may appear 10 to 90 days after sexual contact with an infected person.

Many people infected with syphilis do not have noticeable symptoms and can unknowingly pass the infection on to their sexual partner(s).

### THERE ARE FOUR STAGES OF SYPHILIS INFECTION

#### Stage 1

Primary syphilis: About three weeks after exposure, the person may develop a painless open sore called a chancre usually around the genitals or mouth.

#### Stage 2

Secondary syphilis: About two to 12 weeks later, flu-like symptoms and a rash (which may or may not be itchy) may appear on the palms of hands, soles of the feet or the entire body.

Both the first and second stages of syphilis are highly infectious, and symptoms may go unnoticed. Combined, these two stages may last up to one year.

#### Stage 3

Latent syphilis: This stage has no symptoms and 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 develop tertiary syphilis. In this stage, serious health problems involving the heart, brain, nerves, bones, eyes and joints, or even death can occur.

### HOW IT SPREADS

- Syphilis is usually spread during unprotected oral, anal, or vaginal sex infected person including through mutual masturbation and sharing of sex toys
- It can spread by direct contact with bacteria contained in sores or rashes
- In rare cases, people who share needles can get syphilis through the blood in the used needles
- A pregnant woman with untreated syphilis can give the infection to her baby before birth

### DIAGNOSIS

Syphilis may be diagnosed by swabbing a suspected lesion or chancre and by blood testing. Testing can be done six weeks after a possible exposure or one to four weeks after the appearance of a chancre.

### SYPHILIS DURING PREGNANCY

- Testing for syphilis is recommended during the first prenatal visit

### PUBLIC HEALTH

1-800-361-5653

TTY: 1-866-512-6228

[york.ca/sexualhealth](http://york.ca/sexualhealth)

- If syphilis is left untreated, the infection can be passed to the unborn child during pregnancy or childbirth
- Infection can lead to low birth weight, birth defects or stillbirth; this can be prevented if the mother receives treatment during pregnancy
- The risk of transmission depends on the stage of syphilis; with primary or secondary syphilis, the risk of transmission is 70 to 100 per cent, early- latent syphilis 40 per cent and late-latent syphilis 10 per cent

## TREATMENT

- Syphilis is treated with antibiotics
- The medication of choice is Benzathine Penicillin G by injection
- Depending on the stage of syphilis, one or more treatments with the medication may be necessary
- Complete the treatment as prescribed by your health care provider
- Early treatment is important

## FOLLOW-UP

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).

- Follow-up blood testing after treatment for syphilis is extremely important
- The results of these 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, this does not mean you still have an active infection
- Your health care provider can explain all blood test results with you

## PREVENTION

- Abstain from sex or limit number of sexual partners
- Make informed decisions by talking to your partner about sexual health and the use of condoms before having sex
- Ask your partner(s) to be tested before you have sex
- Always use a condom from beginning to end of any oral, anal, or vaginal sex
- Do not have oral, anal or vaginal sex or any direct contact with the chancre or rashes
- You can get re-infected every time you have sex with an untreated or infected partner
- Having syphilis can increase the likelihood of transmission of HIV from an HIV infected partner to an uninfected partner

Syphilis is a reportable disease. York Region Community and Health Services must be notified so appropriate follow-up can be done. Partner notification is important. How far back in time you go depends on the stage of syphilis, but any partners within the last 3 months and any long-term partners should be notified and tested.

## COMPLICATIONS

- If left untreated, syphilis can cause potentially life-threatening complications, and damage to the brain, heart, bones, and blood vessels
- Sometimes, syphilis can cause mental disorders or neurological problems
- In very exceptional cases, untreated syphilis infection can be fatal
- Syphilis infection leads to an increased risk of spreading or becoming infected with HIV due to the lesions and sores on genitals or anus being an entry way for the virus
- If an infected mother passes syphilis to her infant during birth, this can result in fetal death or congenital syphilis (this includes birth defects and developmental delays)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [sexandu.ca](http://sexandu.ca)
- York Region Public Health Sexual Health Clinics **1-800-361-5653, # 1**