

# Syphilis

## What is Syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by bacteria which is passed from one person to another through sexual contact. Both men and women can become infected. It can also be passed on during pregnancy from mother to child. Using a condom is an important way of preventing infection. However, because the condom will not cover all of the possibly infectious skin, it is unlikely to give 100% protection.

## What are the symptoms?

- The first sign of syphilis is usually a painless sore (Chancre), which appears where the infection has occurred; this is usually on the genitals. Sometimes the sore may occur inside the vagina or anus where you do not notice it.
- The sores are very infectious and may take 2-6 weeks to heal. However, the person will still have syphilis and need treatment.
- After about 7-10 weeks the bacteria will spread to other parts of the body as the infection reaches its second stage.
- A person may feel unwell with a flu like illness
- A rash on the hands, feet and other parts of the body may appear.
- They may also develop soft, wart like growths on the warm, moist areas of the body (genitals, around the anus, under the breasts, armpits) or ulcers in the mouth or on the genitals.
- Signs of secondary syphilis will get better without treatment but the person will still have latent syphilis and still need treatment.

- Should the infection be allowed to develop into its third stage, serious health problems can arise.

## What other problems can it cause?

1. After the secondary syphilis heals, the person will feel fine and not know that they are carrying the infection.
2. This is called the latent stage, where there are no visible signs of the illness.
3. However, without treatment, tertiary syphilis may develop between 5-30 years later.
4. This can seriously affect the brain, spinal cord or heart and may lead to death.
5. Having syphilis can make it easier for a person to become infected with HIV or to pass HIV on to someone else.

## What tests do you do?

Usually syphilis is diagnosed by having a blood test. Sometimes a swab may be taken from the chancre or a wart like growth to look for the bacteria that causes syphilis. Tests should also be done to look for other STIs and HIV.

## Congenital Syphilis (baby born with syphilis)

If a pregnant woman has syphilis, her baby can be infected even if she does not have any symptoms. This can cause a miscarriage or stillbirth. Or it may cause problems with the baby's bones, skin, blood, eyes, ears, teeth or brain. Congenital syphilis is extremely easy to prevent by doing a blood test in all pregnant women and treating them (and their partners) if needed.

**What is the treatment?**

Syphilis is usually treated with an injection of antibiotics. It is important that treatment for syphilis be completed and the person has a follow-up blood test(s) to make sure the infection is completely cured. Sexual partners need to be told so they can also be tested and treated so they don't pass the infection back