

What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacteria *Treponema pallidum*. The infection progresses in stages.

How is syphilis spread?

Syphilis is passed to a partner during sexual contact (vaginal, oral, or anal).

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms will vary depending on the stage of the infection:

Primary Syphilis (1st Stage)

- Symptoms usually develop 3 days to 3 months after contact.
- A painless open sore develops around the genitals, rectum and/or mouth.
- The sore will heal on its own, but the infection remains.

Secondary Syphilis (2nd Stage)

- Symptoms usually develop 2 to 24 weeks after exposure.
- A rash can develop anywhere on the body, including on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet.
- Flu-like symptoms develop, including headache, slight fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, weight loss, and sore throat.

Latent Syphilis (3rd Stage)

- Latent syphilis occurs after secondary syphilis.
- Typically, there are no symptoms.

How can I be tested for syphilis?

A blood test is done.

How is syphilis treated?

- A doctor will give you antibiotics.
- Avoid all sex (oral, anal, and/or vaginal) for 7 days after taking the medication.
- Do not have sex with your current partner until they are tested and treated.

What about partners?

Individuals who test positive for syphilis are asked to tell all sexual partners so they can be tested and/or treated. A public health nurse is able to help contact sexual partners as needed.

Is follow up needed?

Yes. After treatment, blood tests are needed to show that the infection has been treated properly.

Things to think about:

- Longstanding, untreated syphilis can damage the heart, the nervous system and other major organs.
- Individuals infected with syphilis are at greater risk of getting and spreading other STIs, including HIV.
- Taking medication will treat syphilis but any damage that has been done to the body before treatment cannot be reversed.

How can I reduce my chances of getting and spreading syphilis?

- Avoid sex.
- Use condoms/dental dams **every time** you have sex, even if you are using another form of birth control.
- Do not share sex toys.

To reduce your risk of STIs, get tested:

- After your last partner, before every new partner
- After unprotected sex, injection drug use, snorting or crack pipes
- To help prevent STIs, get vaccinated against hepatitis A, B, and HPV.

For more information please contact The Clinic at 519-663-5446.

References

¹Canadian Federation for Sexual Health Retrieved from

http://www.cfsh.ca/Your_Sexual_Health/STIs-and-HIV/

²The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada Retrieved from

<http://www.sexualityandu.ca>

Last reviewed on: June 2016