

Syphilis

is on the Rise.



Don't guess, just test.

Talk.



Test.



Treat.



SERVICE PROVIDERS -VULNERABLE WOMEN TOOLKIT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Campaign Resources and Outreach Materials	3
Background Information	3
Local Data and Risk Factors	4
Service Provider Conversation Guide	4
Supporting Client-Centered Conversations: Key Principles and Examples	5
Harm Reduction Messaging	6
Testing Appointments in Middlesex-London	6
References	7

INTRODUCTION

This toolkit is designed to support service providers working with vulnerable women by offering practical resources to raise syphilis awareness and promote increased testing across Middlesex-London.

Syphilis rates are rising in Ontario, with certain types sharply increasing in our local community. In response, this toolkit supports a targeted campaign focused on women at increased risk, especially those of reproductive age (i.e., 18 to 39 years old). Contributing risk factors include substance use, pregnancy, unstable housing or homelessness, and involvement in the sex trade.

Community partners report that vulnerable populations often have limited awareness of Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) risk and limited access to sexual health education. Barriers such as stigma, substance use, discomfort discussing sexual health, and mistrust of healthcare providers can prevent testing and condom use. This highlights the need for a compassionate, non-judgmental, and informed approach.

This toolkit was created to assist you in your work, recognizing your expertise in supporting vulnerable women in our community. Thank you for your assistance in providing syphilis-related education and promoting testing to your clients.

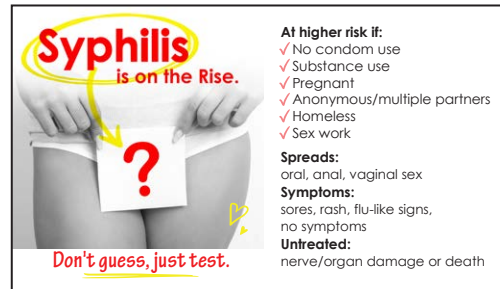
THE TOOLKIT INCLUDES:

- Background information on syphilis and local data emphasizing the need for increased testing.
- A conversation guide with messaging to support sensitive discussions and to promote testing.
- Outreach resources to support your efforts in the community (service provider wallet cards, client facing promotional items, posters).

Together, we can empower women with the knowledge and support they need to protect their health.



poster



wallet card



lip balm

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. It spreads through vaginal, anal, or oral sex via contact with syphilis sores. It can also be passed from an infected parent to their baby during pregnancy or childbirth (PHO, 2025). Anyone who is sexually active, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, can be affected.

Syphilis progresses in stages. It often starts with rashes and painless sores (called chancres) Chancres may appear in areas like the vagina or rectum and can easily go unnoticed. In later stages, some people may experience flu-like symptoms, such as fever, fatigue, or swollen lymph nodes, that are often mistaken for seasonal illness. This can delay testing and diagnosis.

If left untreated, syphilis can cause serious and lasting harm, including nerve damage, vision loss, heart disease, and even death (MLHU, 2025). One of the most severe outcomes is neurosyphilis, when the infection spreads to the brain or spinal cord. It may begin with no symptoms but can progress to hearing loss, stiff neck, paralysis, dementia, or death (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2024).

The good news is that syphilis is curable with antibiotics when caught early. A simple blood test can detect the infection, even if you don't feel sick. Testing is free, confidential, and doesn't require a health card. Regular testing is one of the easiest ways to protect your health and prevent passing the infection to others.

LOCAL DATA AND RISK FACTORS

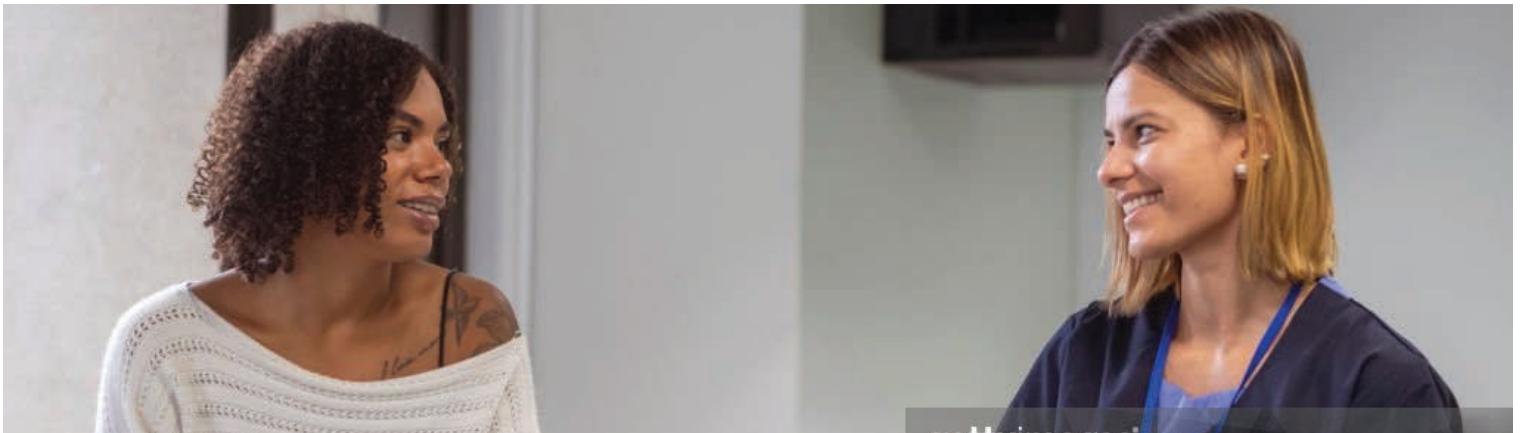
Public Health Ontario (2025) reports a rise in syphilis cases among women and increasing rates of congenital syphilis across the province. In the Middlesex-London area, although overall infectious syphilis cases declined in 2023 and 2024, late latent syphilis (i.e. syphilis with no symptoms and acquired over a year ago), has increased five-fold since 2021 (CDC, 2021).

Certain exposures and risks can increase the likelihood of contracting syphilis, including:

- Not using condoms
- Difficulty accessing basic needs like food, clothing, or education
- Substance use
- Anonymous sex or multiple sexual partners
- Being underhoused or homeless
- Working in the sex trade



These challenges can make it harder to stay safe and prioritize health, which is why your support, as a service provider for vulnerable women, is so important.



SERVICE PROVIDER CONVERSATION GUIDE

”

As we know, being a service provider to vulnerable women involves acknowledging systemic barriers such as trauma, poverty, and discrimination. It requires empathy, cultural sensitivity, and patience, all while navigating under-resourced systems and maintaining professional boundaries.

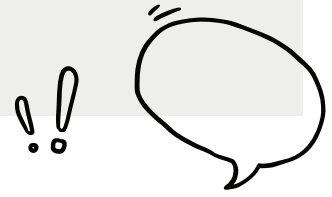
Syphilis testing is a simple blood test and a key tool in prevention. Encouraging testing among vulnerable populations begins with building trust. By creating a safe, supportive space for open conversations, and using a person-centered, trauma-informed approach, we can promote testing without stigma or judgment.

It is important to acknowledge that, as someone who supports vulnerable women, you are the expert in delivering effective messaging. To complement your expertise, we have included some key takeaways from a webinar by CATIE (2025) titled “*Addressing rising syphilis rates among women in Canada*”, where several themes emerged as essential for encouraging syphilis testing within this population in a respectful, supportive, and impactful way. Below are some examples.

SUPPORTING CLIENT-CENTERED CONVERSATIONS: KEY PRINCIPLES AND EXAMPLES

Acknowledge the effort involved in seeking care.

Recognize that showing up for care can be a significant step, especially for those facing multiple challenges.



Approach discussions with compassion and without judgment.

Allow space for individuals to share only what they feel comfortable disclosing.

Example: "I want you to feel comfortable talking about anything here, and there's no judgement. It's all about your health and well-being."

Validate unique circumstances, needs, and values.

Show understanding of the broader challenges that may affect someone's ability to prioritize health.

Example: "I know it's tough when you're dealing with things like finding a safe place to stay, food, or transportation. These challenges can make it hard to focus on your health. I'm here to listen and help however I can."

Example: "It's important to talk openly with your partners about testing and protection. These conversations can help keep everyone safe, and we can explore what that might look like for you."

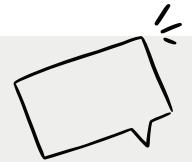
Reframe from behavior to experience.

Avoid assumptions; center the person's lived experience over personal choices.

Example: "I'd love to hear more about your experiences and what's been going on for you. What has made it harder or easier for you to get care in the past?"

Build relationships through warmth, listening, and familiarity.

Adopt a kinship or "auntie" lens, bringing empathy, deep listening, and a sense of comfort to each interaction.



Example: "I understand that things can feel overwhelming sometimes. There's no judgment here. If you have questions or concerns about syphilis or testing, let's talk it through. You deserve care that works for you."

Encourage empowerment and control over health decisions.

Support autonomy and informed choice, especially in navigating testing and treatment.

Example: "This is your health, and I want to make sure you feel comfortable making the choices that are right for you."

Example: "I want to make testing as easy as possible. If you ever need help with booking follow-ups or figuring out next steps, I'm here to support you."

HARM REDUCTION MESSAGING

As we know, harm reduction is about meeting people where they are and supporting safer choices without judgement. When it comes to syphilis and other STIs, reducing risk doesn't mean eliminating all behaviors, it means helping individuals make informed decisions to protect their health and the health of others. To protect health through safer sex, we additionally recommend using **condoms** or **dental dams** during sexual activity.



SYPHILIS TESTING

Testing at the Middlesex-London Health Unit

Syphilis testing is **confidential, free of charge and does not require a health card**. Testing appointments can be scheduled by phone or online. We also accept some walk-in appointments.

The Clinic

110-355 Wellington Street (Citi Plaza)
London, ON
519-663-5317

<https://www.healthunit.com/sexually-transmitted-infection-clinic>

Drop-in Hours:

Monday 4:30 - 7:00 PM
Wednesday: 4:30 - 7:00 PM
Friday: 8:30 - 10:30 AM

Please provide our **branded lip balms** to your clients as part of raising awareness.

Testing at Local Healthcare Providers and Clinics

If a client has a health care provider, they can make an appointment for testing at their healthcare provider's office or at local walk-in clinics.

WHERE TO LEARN MORE



To learn more about syphilis prevention, screening, testing, and care, please visit:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/syphilis.html>

Tips for Community Organizations:

<https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/publications/diseases-conditions/syphilis-prevention-care-tips-community-based-organizations/syphilis-prevention-care-tips-community-based-organizations.pdf>

REFERENCES



CATIE. (2025). Addressing rising syphilis rates among women in Canada [Webinar]. CATIE. <https://www.catie.ca/addressing-rising-syphilis-rates-among-women-in-canada>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). Syphilis - STI treatment guidelines. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/std/treatment-guidelines/syphilis.htm>

Government of Canada. (2024). Syphilis: Symptoms and treatment. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/syphilis.html>

Middlesex-London Health Unit. (2024). Syphilis. <https://www.healthunit.com/syphilis>

Public Health Agency of Canada (2012). Syphilis. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/syphilis.html>

Public Health Agency of Canada. (2024). Syphilis. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/syphilis.html>

Public Health Agency of Canada (2024). Syphilis Prevention and Care: Tips for Community-Based Organizations. <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/publications/diseases-conditions/syphilis-prevention-care-tips-community-based-organizations/syphilis-prevention-care-tips-community-based-organizations.pdf>



Middlesex-London Health Unit



www.healthunit.com



MLHealthUnit



@MLHealthUnit



@Middlesex.London.Health.Unit

110-355 Wellington St. (Citi Plaza) London, ON N6A 3N7
519-663-5317