

# Syphilis

## Fact Sheet

### What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial sexually transmitted infection. Syphilis affects the body in different stages over many years if not treated and cured.

### How is it spread?

You can get syphilis if you have oral, vaginal or anal sex with someone who has it. Syphilis can be spread to others during the first year or two the person has it. After that time, the person will still be infected but not be able to pass it on. Syphilis is also spread from a pregnant woman to her baby. Some of these babies will die before they are born (about 4 in 10).

### What are the symptoms?

Stage	Time Before the First or Next Stage Starts	Symptoms
Primary	3 weeks (3-90 days)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Usually a single open, but painless sore where the syphilis bacteria entered the body.</li> <li>Sore is often found on the genitals, anus or mouth.</li> <li>The sore will heal on its own in 3-8 weeks.</li> <li>While the sore is present, the person is at a higher risk of getting or transmitting HIV.</li> <li>Swollen glands in the neck, underarms and groin.</li> </ul>
Secondary	2-12 weeks (2 weeks – 6 months)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>flu-like symptoms</li> <li>feeling unwell</li> <li>fever and swollen glands</li> <li>hair loss, including eyebrows and eyelashes</li> <li>muscle and joint pain</li> <li>skin rashes especially on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet, mucus lesions and wart-like bumps</li> <li>eye pain/redness</li> <li>meningitis</li> </ul>
Latent	After the secondary symptoms have disappeared. Time can vary depending on the person.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Other than when secondary symptoms reappear, people in the latent stage will have no symptoms.</li> <li>This stage can last from one to 30 years</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early</li> <li>Late</li> </ul>	Early latent: <1 year Late latent: ≥ 1 year	
Tertiary	When major health complications become noticeable – 1 to 46 years depending on the type of damage	This stage happens to approximately 40% of untreated people, and is very destructive to the body, causing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>major sores inside and outside the body</li> <li>serious heart and blood vessel problems</li> <li>mental health problems</li> <li>damage to ears and eyes</li> <li>damage to bones</li> <li>death</li> </ul>

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**Whether you have symptoms or not, or if symptoms come and go, syphilis bacteria will remain in the body until the person is treated properly.**

### **How can you get tested for syphilis?**

A blood sample is taken and sent for syphilis testing. If you have a painless genital/anal sore it may be swabbed for syphilis. Syphilis can also be found in the fluid around the brain and spinal cord. In hospital, a sample of this fluid (CSF) can be removed and tested.

### **What can syphilis do to the body?**

Untreated syphilis can cause permanent damage to the brain, heart, blood vessels and bones that can lead to death (see chart above). Syphilis is curable, so the sooner you are tested and treated, the less damage will occur.

### **How is it treated?**

Syphilis is treatable with penicillin given by a needle. If a person is allergic to penicillin, another kind of antibiotic can be used. Depending what stage the person is in will determine how much medication is needed. People who have HIV/AIDS will need to be treated carefully to make sure they are cured. After a person has been treated they should have repeat blood work done to be sure that they are cured. After a person is treated they can get syphilis again if they have contact with an infected person.

### **What about sexual partners?**

The people you had sexual contact with may also need to be tested and treated.

### **How can I avoid becoming infected with syphilis?**

- Get tested if you are pregnant.
- Always use condoms and dental dams.
- Do not share sex toys.
- Limit your number of sexual partners.
- Ask your partner about his or her sexual history.
- Get tested before having sex with a new partner and ask him or her to be tested.
- Take care if drinking or using drugs to avoid unplanned sex.
- Abstain from having sex.

### **Other Questions?**

Talk to your health care provider or call our Communicable Disease Program at 613-966-5500 or 1-800-267-2803, ext. 349. | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | [hpePublicHealth.ca](http://hpePublicHealth.ca)

### **References**

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- Health Canada, *It's Your Health Syphilis*, February 2004.
- Public Health Agency of Canada, *Canadian Guidelines on Sexually Transmitted Infections*, 2008.
- Public Health Agency of Canada, *Frequently Asked Questions About Syphilis*, February 2006.
- The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, *Sexually Transmitted Infections, What Are They? Syphilis*, August 2007.

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