Syphilis

Looking after your sexual health
Syphilis

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI). It is not as common as some sexually transmitted infections but if left untreated it can cause very serious health problems in both men and women. This booklet gives you information about syphilis, what you can do if you are worried that you might have the infection and advice on how to protect yourself.

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What causes Syphilis?
Syphilis is caused by bacteria known as Treponema pallidum. This is easily passed from one person to another through sexual contact. Anyone who is sexually active can get it. Both men and women can have syphilis, and pass it on.

How is syphilis passed on?
- You can pass syphilis on without knowing you have the infection because symptoms can be mild and you may not notice or recognise them.
- Syphilis can be passed from one person to another during sex and by direct skin contact with someone who has syphilis sores or a syphilis rash. It can be passed on before symptoms are noticeable, or after they’ve disappeared.

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The infection can spread if you have vaginal, anal or oral sex, or share sex toys. Using a condom correctly will reduce your chance of getting or passing on syphilis.

Syphilis can also be transmitted by blood transfusion. However, in the UK all blood donors are screened to detect this before the blood is used.

It is also possible for a pregnant woman to pass the infection to her unborn baby. This is known as congenital syphilis (see What happens if I get syphilis when I’m pregnant? on page 12).

You cannot catch syphilis from kissing, hugging, sharing baths or towels, swimming pools, toilet seats or from sharing cups, plates or cutlery.

What are the signs and symptoms?
The signs and symptoms are the same in both men and women. They can be difficult to recognise and you might not notice them.

Syphilis can develop in three stages:

- the first stage: called primary syphilis
- the second stage: called secondary syphilis
- the third or latent stage: called tertiary syphilis.

If you do get symptoms, you might notice the following:

First stage syphilis
- One or more sores (called a chancre – pronounced “shanker”) – usually painless – will appear where the bacteria entered the body. On average, this will be 2–3 weeks after coming into contact with syphilis but it can be sooner or later.
• These sores can appear anywhere on the body. In women, they are found mainly on the vulva (the lips around the opening to the vagina), the clitoris, cervix (entrance to the uterus (womb), and around the opening of the urethra (tube where urine comes out) and the anus.

• In men, they appear mainly around the opening of the urethra, on the penis and foreskin, and around the anus.

• Less commonly, in men and women, sores may appear in the mouth, and on the lips, tonsils, fingers or buttocks.

• The sores of first stage syphilis are very infectious and may take 2–6 weeks to heal. By this time, the bacteria will have spread to other parts of the body and it will then be known as second stage syphilis.

Second stage syphilis
If the infection remains untreated the second stage usually occurs some weeks after any sores have appeared and healed. Syphilis is still infectious at this stage and can be passed on to someone else. The symptoms include:

• A painless rash that is not normally itchy. It can spread all over the body, or appear in patches, but it is often seen on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet.

• Flat, warty-looking growths on the vulva in women and around the anus in both men and women (often mistaken for genital warts).

• A flu-like illness, tiredness and loss of appetite, with swollen glands (this can last for weeks or months).

• White patches on the tongue or roof of the mouth.
• Patchy hair loss.

**Third stage or latent syphilis**
When syphilis remains untreated it goes into another phase known as third stage or latent syphilis. Untreated syphilis may, after many years, start to cause very serious damage to the heart, brain, eyes, other internal organs, bones and nervous system. At this stage syphilis can lead to death.

Third stage syphilis is rare in the UK and this booklet does not cover it.

**How will I know if I have the infection?**
You can only be certain you have syphilis if you have a test. If you think you might have syphilis it is important that you don’t delay getting a test. Even if you don’t have symptoms you may wish to be tested, particularly if:

• you, or a partner, think you might have symptoms
• you have recently had unprotected sex with a new partner
• you, or a partner, have had unprotected sex with other partners
• a sexual partner tells you they have a sexually transmitted infection
• you have another sexually transmitted infection
• you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy.

Don’t delay seeking advice – clinics don’t mind doing sexual health check-ups.
How soon after sex can I have a check-up?
It is important not to delay getting a test if you think you might have syphilis. Syphilis may not show up on the test straightaway, so it will be repeated at a later appointment.

What does the check-up involve?
The doctor or nurse will ask you to give a blood sample.

They will do a genital examination. For women this may include an internal examination of the vagina and for men an examination of the penis, foreskin and urethral opening (where urine comes out).

Both men and women may have the anus examined internally and externally.

The doctor or nurse will also check the body generally for any rashes or warty growths. They may check the mouth and throat area.

They will use a swab to collect a sample of fluid from any sores. A swab looks a bit like a cotton bud, but is smaller and rounded. It sometimes has a small plastic loop on the end rather than a cotton tip. It is wiped over any sores to pick up samples of discharge and cells. This only takes a few seconds and is not painful, though it may be uncomfortable for a moment.

Cervical screening tests and routine blood tests do not detect syphilis. If you are not sure whether you have been tested for syphilis, just ask.
How accurate are the tests?
No tests are 100 per cent accurate, but syphilis tests should pick up almost all infections.

Where can I get a check-up?
There are a number of services you can go to. Choose the service you feel most comfortable with.

A test can be done at:
- a genitourinary medicine (GUM) or sexual health clinic
- some general practices (ask a doctor or practice nurse).

For information on how to find a service see Helplines and websites on the back page.

Pregnant women attending antenatal services and some gynaecology services will routinely be offered a test. See What happens if I get syphilis when I’m pregnant? on page 12.

Will I have to pay for tests and treatment?
All tests are free through NHS services. Treatment is also free unless you go to your general practice when you may have to pay a prescription charge for the treatment.

What is the treatment for syphilis?
- First and second stage syphilis is treated using a single antibiotic injection or a course of injections or by taking antibiotic tablets or capsules. Penicillin is the most common treatment for syphilis, but there are several different antibiotics that can be used. Let the doctor or nurse know if you are allergic to penicillin.
• Treatment usually lasts around 10–14 days but sometimes longer. If complications have occurred you may also need other treatment.

• If there is a high chance of you having the infection, treatment may be started before the results of the test are back. You will usually be given treatment if any sexual partner has syphilis.

• You cannot buy any treatments without a prescription.

• There is no evidence that complementary therapies can cure syphilis.

• Treatment can safely be given in pregnancy (see ‘What happens if I get syphilis when I’m pregnant?’ on page 12).

How effective is the treatment?

First and second stage syphilis
• Treatment is very effective for both first and second stage syphilis. As long as the treatment is taken correctly the syphilis will be completely cured.

Third stage or latent syphilis
Syphilis at this stage can be treated, but any damage already done to your body will be permanent.