Syphilis is a bacterial infection. It is usually sexually transmitted, but may also be passed from an infected mother to her unborn child.

Signs and symptoms
The signs and symptoms are the same in both men and women. They can be difficult to recognise and may take up to 3 months to show after having sexual contact with an infected person. Syphilis has several stages. The primary and secondary stages are very infectious.

Primary stage
One or more painless sores appear at the place where the bacteria entered the body. On average, this will be after 21 days. You may not notice them.

These sores can appear anywhere on the body but mainly:
- on the vulva (lips of the vagina), the clitoris and around the opening of the urethra (the water passage)
- on the cervix (neck of the womb) in women and on the penis and foreskin in men
Syphilis

- around the anus and mouth (both sexes)

The sore (or sores) is very infectious and may take from 2 to 6 weeks to heal.

**Secondary stage**

If the infection remains untreated the secondary stage usually occurs 6 to 12 weeks after the appearance of sores. The symptoms include:

- a non-itchy rash covering the whole body or appearing in patches

- a flu-like illness, a feeling of tiredness and loss of appetite, accompanied by swollen glands (this can last for weeks or months)

- sores in the mouth

- flat, warty-looking growths on the vulva in women and around the anus in both sexes

- patchy hair loss

When these symptoms are present syphilis is very infectious and may be sexually transmitted to a partner.

**Treatment at any time during these first two stages of syphilis will cure the infection.**

**Latent stage**

Latent syphilis refers to the presence of untreated syphilis. You can have no symptoms or signs of the infection, which is diagnosed by a positive blood test. If left untreated, you may develop symptomatic late syphilis. This usually develops after more than 10 years. It is then that syphilis can affect the nervous system and heart.

If treatment is given during the latent stage the infection can be cured. However, if there has been heart or nervous-system damage before treatment is started this may be irreversible.

**How syphilis is passed on**

Syphilis can be transmitted by:

- having sex with someone who has the infection

- a mother to her unborn baby

**Where to go for help**

- Your local NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic. You can find details of your nearest NHS sexual health clinic in the phone book under genito-urinary medicine (GUM), sexually transmitted diseases (STD) or venereal diseases (VD).

Or phone your local hospital and ask for the 'special' or GUM clinic. Or check the website (www.playingsafely.co.uk) for a directory of GUME clinics in the UK. You will get free, confidential advice and treatment. You can go to any clinic anywhere in the country – you don’t have to go to a local one – and you don’t have to be referred by your GP. (Non-NHS sexual health clinics may not always offer the full range of services which are available at NHS sexual health clinics.)

- Your own GP.

**The tests for syphilis**

At the clinic the following tests will normally be made:

- A blood sample is taken.

- If you have a sore, a specimen of fluid is taken from this and looked at under a microscope.

- Your genital area and whole body are examined by the doctor.

- Samples are taken, using a cotton-wool or spongy swab, from any sores.

- Women are given an internal examination.

- A sample of urine is taken.

None of these tests should be painful, but they may be slightly uncomfortable.

**Diagnosis and treatment**

Samples taken during the examination are looked at under a microscope to check for infection. Samples are sent to a laboratory for testing. The result is usually available within one week.

If you are told that you have syphilis a health adviser will explain the infection to you and answer any questions you may have. You will also be asked about your sexual partner(s), so that, if necessary, they can get treatment too.

If it is suspected that you have the early infectious stages of syphilis, you should not have oral, vaginal or anal sex. You should also not have any kind of sex involving contact between your partner and any sores or rashes you may have until the treatment is completed.

Treatment for syphilis is often given as a single injection or a course of penicillin injections or, in some cases, antibiotic tablets or capsules.