

What is Syphilis?

- Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection
- It has become much more common in recent years in New Zealand particularly amongst men who have sex with men
- Syphilis greatly increases the risk of getting HIV from someone with HIV or of giving HIV to someone else during unprotected sex.

How do you get Syphilis?

- Syphilis is very infectious and is usually caught by having sexual contact with an infected person. This may include vaginal, anal or oral sex or just close skin-to-skin contact.
- The chances of catching syphilis are lower if you use condoms during sex.
- Syphilis can also be spread from mother to baby during pregnancy if the mother is infected. Syphilis can cause miscarriage or still-birth if it is not treated during pregnancy.

How do I know if I have Syphilis?

- **Approximately 50% of people do not get any symptoms**
- **Syphilis is usually diagnosed by a blood test.**
- For those who get symptoms syphilis is divided into **3 stages**: primary, secondary and tertiary.
- **Primary and secondary syphilis are also known as Infectious Syphilis.**
- Non-infectious syphilis includes late latent and tertiary syphilis.

Primary Syphilis

- The first sign of syphilis is a sore, usually on the genitals but may be at other sites of sexual contact. (e.g. cervix, mouth, anus)
- Because it is usually painless it may go unnoticed.
- The sore usually appears 3-4 weeks after infection but sometimes it takes longer. The glands in the groin area may also become swollen.
- The sore will disappear on its own accord within a few weeks. Even though the sore heals you still have the syphilis infection and can pass it onto others.
- Any genital sore must be examined by a doctor even if it starts to heal and it is small and painless.

Secondary Syphilis

- The most common symptom of secondary syphilis is a rash
- It usually appears 6 weeks to 6 months after infection. It may appear on the body, face, arms and often on the palms and soles of the feet.
- The rash lasts up to 4-6 weeks and disappears even if not treated.
- There may also be other symptoms such as mouth ulcers, headaches, swollen glands, fever, hair loss, tiredness, or warty growths in the genitals or anus.
- If untreated, the symptoms of primary and secondary syphilis disappear, but you can remain infectious to sexual partners for up to 2 years.

Late (Tertiary) Syphilis

- If not treated, a small number of people will get late stage syphilis (or tertiary syphilis), which can cause damage to the heart, brain, nerves, blood vessels, liver, bones and joints many years later.
- People with late syphilis are not infectious to sexual partners.

How do I get tested for Syphilis?

- Syphilis is usually diagnosed by a blood test as part of a routine sexual health check.
- This can be done at the sexual health clinic, your GP or other health provider
- The tests can take up to 3 months after you get the infection to become positive.
- The test may be negative if you test too soon, but treatment is usually recommended if you have had sexual contact with someone with infectious syphilis, even if your blood test is negative.
- A blood test for syphilis is one of the routine tests in pregnancy

How is Syphilis treated?

- **Syphilis is usually treated by injections with an antibiotic called penicillin**
- **If you are allergic to penicillin other antibiotics may be given**
- **Proper treatment of the mother during pregnancy will prevent the baby being born with syphilis.**
- The blood tests can stay positive for months or years after the disease has been successfully treated, but this is nothing to worry about.

Important advice

- You must finish all the treatment to be cured.
- If you have infectious syphilis you will need to tell sexual partners to get tested and treated.
- The doctor or nurse will tell you how far back to notify partners – usually anyone in the last 3 to 6 months.
- Do not have sex until any sores or rashes have completely gone away.
- After treatment, follow up blood tests are essential for at least one year to make sure cure is complete.
- You are legally obliged to attend for follow-up blood tests until you have been advised you are cured.

Talking to partners

- If you have been diagnosed with syphilis all your sexual partners from the last few months must be advised to attend their doctor or local Sexual Health Clinic.
- You should not have sex until your rash or sore clears up because you remain infectious for some time after treatment.
- Some people feel embarrassed, scared or angry when they or their partner has a sexually transmitted infection (STI). This is common and OK. Do not let these feelings stop you from getting medical help or telling your partner. Anyone who is sexually active can get an STI.
- If you need help contacting your partner(s) or are worried about this, talk to the doctor or nurse at the Sexual Health Clinic for advice.

How do I protect myself?

- You can reduce your risk by:
 - Having sex with one person who has sex only with you.
 - Using condoms until you and your sexual partner(s) have been checked for sexually transmitted infections.
 - Having regular sexual health check-ups.

Where do I go for a check-up?

- Sexual health clinics have specialists who are experienced in the management and diagnosis of syphilis. Treatment is free and confidential and the people there can help with testing your sexual partners or family members.