

Syphilis is a sexually transmissible infection (STI).

## Causes

A bacterium called *Treponema pallidum*

## Symptoms

Not all people with syphilis have symptoms so you may not know you have it unless you have a blood test for it. There are 3 stages of infection, known as primary, secondary and late syphilis. The symptoms vary according to the stage.

### Primary Syphilis

A hard, painless sore occurs usually on the genitals or the mouth or anus. It may occur in hidden sites (e.g. cervix or mouth) and you may not notice it. The sores will go away after several weeks without treatment, but you would still be infected

### Secondary Syphilis

Symptoms may occur 2-4 months after infection and last several weeks. There may be a flat red skin rash on the back, chest, hands and feet. Other symptoms include fever, swollen glands in the groin and armpits, a genital rash, hair loss and general tiredness. If untreated, these symptoms may come and go for up to 2 years. Other symptoms that may develop in moist areas of the body, like the mouth and genital areas are syphilis warts and white patches. While these and the rash are present, secondary syphilis is highly infectious.

### Latent Syphilis

If syphilis is not treated in the primary or secondary phase it becomes latent. At this stage there are no symptoms and it is only picked up on blood tests. If left untreated late syphilis could develop and produce serious problems with several organs, mainly the brain and heart. If you have latent syphilis you may need further tests, specialist review and longer treatment. Latent and late syphilis are not infectious and can be avoided by effective treatment of early syphilis.

### How Is It Transmitted?

You can catch syphilis through oral, vaginal or anal sex with a person who has syphilis. It is transmitted through skin-to-skin contact with an infected area. Syphilis is highly contagious when the sore or rash is present. More rarely, syphilis is transmitted from mother to baby during pregnancy.

### Management

Although the treatment is straightforward with antibiotics, it is important to have repeat blood tests to check that the treatment has worked. Usually your doctor will arrange to see you one month after treatment. They will also recommend follow-up blood tests and review usually at 6, 12 and 24 months after treatment. It is very important to do these tests as if they are not showing improvement you may need further tests or more treatment.

Partners of people with syphilis also need to be treated as they may also be infected. If they are not treated you can get re-infected.

### Prevention

- Use condoms for vaginal and anal sex. Condoms may also be used for oral sex.
- Both partners should be tested for STIs before having unprotected sex.
- If your partner has other sexual partners, you could get syphilis if you don't use condoms.