

Important advice

- You must finish all the course of treatment to be cured.
- If you have infectious syphilis you will need to tell your sexual partners to get tested and treated.
- Follow up blood tests are essential and 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 3 to 6 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 having sex 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.

Phone 0800 739 432 Monday to Friday to book your appointment at one of the Auckland Sexual Health Clinics or visit our website www.ashs.org.nz for more information around opening hours.

Greenlane Clinical Centre
Bldg 7 Level 3
Greenlane West

South Auckland
12 Waddon Place
Mangere



North Shore
418 Glenfield Rd
Glenfield

West Auckland
Totara Health Level 2
1 McCrae Way
New Lynn

Auckland Sexual Health Service

Syphilis

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection caused by a bacterium called *treponema pallidum*.

Syphilis is very infectious and is usually caught by having close 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.

If infected, syphilis can also spread from mother to a baby during pregnancy. Syphilis can cause miscarriage or still-birth if it is not treated during pregnancy.

This fact sheet is designed to provide you with information on disease. It is not intended to replace the need for a consultation with your doctor. People are strongly advised to check with their healthcare provider about any specific questions or concerns. Every effort has been taken to ensure that the information in this pamphlet is correct at the time of publishing (2020).

What are the symptoms?

Approximately 50% of people do not get any symptoms. 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.

Syphilis is usually diagnosed by a blood test

Primary Syphilis

The first sign of syphilis is a sore, usually on the penis or outside the vagina but it may be at other sites (e.g. inside the vagina, mouth, anus). Because it is usually painless it may not be noticed.

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 within a few weeks.

This doesn't mean the infection is cured, the syphilis is still there and is still infectious. Any sore on your genitals must be examined by a doctor, even if it doesn't hurt.

Secondary Syphilis

The most common symptom of secondary syphilis is a rash. It usually appears 6 weeks to 6 months after infection. It often appears on hands or feet, but can also be on your body or your face.

The rash lasts up to 6 weeks and then disappears, even if it's not treated.

There may also be other symptoms such as mouth ulcers, headaches, swollen glands, fever, hair loss, tiredness, or warty growths around the genitals or anus.

If untreated, the symptoms of primary and secondary syphilis disappear, but the infection is still in the body and can be passed on 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 – this can happen many years later.

People with late syphilis are not infectious to sexual partners but still need treatment.

How do I get tested?

Syphilis is usually diagnosed by a blood test as part of a sexual health check. This can be done at the sexual health clinic, your GP or other health provider

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. It can take 3 months after you had sex for the infection to show up on the test.

A blood test for syphilis is one of the regular 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. Your treatment plan will depend on what stage of syphilis you have.

Proper treatment of a mother during pregnancy will prevent the baby being born with syphilis.

Part of the blood tests can stay positive for months or years after the disease has been successfully treated, but this is nothing to worry about – it shows evidence of a previous infection.