

# WOMEN AND

# SYPHILIS



Syphilis is on the rise among women aged 15 to 44 in Australia. Learn more about syphilis and how to protect you and, if you become pregnant, your unborn child.

## WHAT IS SYPHILIS?

Syphilis is a sexually transmissible infection (STI) that can cause serious health issues. It is passed from one person to another during sexual activity.

There has been an increase in syphilis cases among women. Between 2016 and 2022, rates of infectious syphilis in women aged 15 to 44 increased by 158 per cent\*.

## YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW YOU HAVE SYPHILIS

Not everyone who has syphilis has symptoms, so people often don't realise they have it. This means that a person could have caught syphilis before they met their current partner and unknowingly passed the infection on to them. That's why it's important for you and any sexual partner(s) you have to get tested regularly for STIs like syphilis – even if you have no symptoms.

## SYPHILIS SYMPTOMS VARY FROM PERSON TO PERSON

For those who do get symptoms of syphilis, the first sign is one or more sores or ulcers at the site of the infection (genitals and mouth). Over time this can develop into rashes, skin lesions, swollen lymph nodes, hair loss, muscle and joint aches, headaches and fatigue.

Without treatment, syphilis can cause brain infections, dementia, lung and heart failure, blindness and death.

## PASSING SYPHILIS ONTO A BABY IS DANGEROUS

Untreated syphilis during pregnancy can lead to the mother passing the infection to her baby before birth. This is known as congenital syphilis and can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, premature births, low birth weight and death of the baby shortly after birth.



A baby with congenital syphilis can also experience serious health issues that affect their growth and development, such as permanent organ and brain damage. Some babies won't show symptoms until they're older, which can lead to a delay in diagnosis.

### GETTING A REGULAR TEST CAN HELP YOU

Even if you don't have symptoms, getting tested regularly for syphilis is important. See your local doctor to assess your risk of contracting syphilis and get tested.

If you are pregnant, it is recommended you also get tested at your first antenatal visit to prevent congenital syphilis.

If you live in an area where there is a syphilis outbreak, you should get tested at your first antenatal visit, at 28 and 36 weeks, when your baby is born, and six weeks after birth. To find out whether you live in an outbreak area, go to [health.gov.au](http://health.gov.au) and search "syphilis outbreak".

### PRACTISING SAFE SEX

The best way to prevent syphilis is to practise safe sex:

- Always use condoms with condom-safe lubricants (e.g. water or silicone based)
- Always use condoms or dental dams during oral sex.

- Avoid sexual activity if you or your sexual partner is unwell, especially if they have symptoms of syphilis. This includes rashes, skin lesions, swollen lymph nodes, hair loss, muscle and joint aches, headaches and fatigue.
- Get tested regularly.



Australian Department of Health and Aged Care, (2023). National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System. Available at: <https://nindss.health.gov.au/pbi-dashboard/> [Accessed 21 December 2023]

Due to the dynamic nature of the NNDSS, data are subject to retrospective revision and may vary from data reported in published NNDSS reports and reports of notification data by states and territories.

**For more information  
about syphilis go to**

[health.gov.au/syphilis](http://health.gov.au/syphilis)



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Health  
and Aged Care**