



## Discussion guide – syphilis

Syphilis is a sexually transmissible infection (STI) caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. It is a serious disease that can cause short and long-term health issues if left untreated. With early diagnosis, most people can receive treatment and recover from syphilis.

This discussion guide helps healthcare professionals and interested parties discuss the sexually transmissible infection (STI) syphilis with their patients or members of the public, including those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Please note that screening for syphilis should form part of a broader STI screen.

### Approaching the conversation

When discussing syphilis, it is important to convey that syphilis is nothing to be ashamed of. STI are common and many people have had, or will have, an STI in their lifetime.

Clinical questions that are gender and sexuality neutral are key to forming better partnerships and ensuring sexual behaviours to address syphilis risk are better addressed. It is important to consider cultural sensitivities and attitudes around topics such as sexuality, gender and illicit drug use. STI-related stigma and discrimination are commonly encountered and persist in many societies in Australia.

Some things you might ask to get the conversation started are:

- When was the last time you were tested for STI?
- Are you worried you might have syphilis?
- Have you recently had a sexual partner who might have syphilis?
- What are your current symptoms?

### Encouraging testing, treatment and contact tracing

If a person is infected or may be infected with syphilis, it is important to be clear about the health risks the disease poses to them. Untreated syphilis infection can lead to serious health outcomes and in some cases, death.

Not everyone who has syphilis has symptoms, so people often do not 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.

Even if they do not present with symptoms, getting tested regularly for syphilis and other STI is an important part of sexual health management. Encourage them to regularly assess their



risk of contracting syphilis with a healthcare professional and receive a test.

If they are positive for syphilis infection, it is important to encourage them to notify their current and previous sexual partner(s) and to recommend they get tested as well.

If they are nervous about approaching their partner(s) to talk about it themselves, they can use an anonymous contact tracing system or work with their health provider to decide on the most appropriate method.

For more information on contact tracing, see the Australasian Contact Tracing Guidelines at [contacttracing.ashm.org.au/](https://contacttracing.ashm.org.au/).

### **Privacy**

Privacy and confidentiality are a large concern to many people who have been tested for or have been diagnosed with syphilis. Privacy laws in Australia regulate the collection and use of personal health information in order to protect patient confidentiality.

Any discussion regarding a person's syphilis status should be considerate of these laws and the person's wishes for autonomy. Note that the duties to protect privacy and maintain confidentiality are not absolute, particularly when the health of others may be at risk.

Syphilis and other common STI are considered nationally notifiable diseases and all cases are provided to the Commonwealth's National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System. This information is deidentified to ensure anonymity.

### **More information**

For more information on syphilis, visit [health.gov.au/syphilis](https://health.gov.au/syphilis) and download our factsheet for health professionals.