



## Frequently Asked Questions – syphilis

### What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a sexually transmissible infection (STI) caused by the bacteria *Treponema pallidum*, that can cause serious health issues.

It is passed from one person to another during sexual activity (vaginal, oral and anal sex) or from a mother to her child during pregnancy or at birth (during delivery).

### How do I know if I have it? What are the symptoms?

The only way to know if you have syphilis is if you get tested for it. There are four stages of syphilis infection (primary, secondary, latent and tertiary) in adults. Each stage presents with different signs and symptoms. Often, symptoms of syphilis may be highly variable. Many cases do not follow the classical stages or even show any symptoms at all.

The first sign of syphilis is often the appearance of one or more sores or ulcers at the site of the infection (e.g. 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 eventually cause brain infections, dementia, lung and heart failure, blindness and death.

### Why should I get tested?

Untreated syphilis infection can lead to serious health outcomes and in some cases, death.

Even if you don't currently have symptoms, getting tested regularly for syphilis is an important part of sexual health management. You should regularly assess your risk of contracting an STI with a healthcare professional.

Not everyone who has syphilis has symptoms, so people often do not realise they have it. This means you could have caught syphilis from someone without realising and unknowingly passed it on.

If you are pregnant, it is recommended you also get tested at your first antenatal visit or during the first 12 weeks of your pregnancy 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 6 weeks after birth.



### **Am I in an outbreak area?**

To find out if you live in an outbreak area, go to [health.gov.au](http://health.gov.au) and search 'syphilis outbreak'.

### **Where can I get tested for syphilis?**

Visit your local doctor or sexual health clinic to get a syphilis test. You can also get tested at family planning clinics, youth health centres, women's health centres and Aboriginal community-controlled health services.

Syphilis testing is often bulk-billed so there won't be any cost to you. You may have to pay to see your doctor.

### **What is the test for syphilis? Is it invasive?**

The test for syphilis is a blood test which your doctor can organise for you.

Once your doctor receives your test results, they will contact you to discuss next steps, including treatment options if you have tested positive for syphilis.

### **Does my partner need a test even if I have had one and don't have syphilis?**

Not everyone who has syphilis has symptoms, so people often don't realise they have it. That's why it's important that you and any sexual partner(s) you have get tested regularly for STIs like syphilis – even if you have no symptoms.

### **How can I prevent syphilis transmission?**

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

- Always use condoms with water-based lubricant during vaginal and anal sex.
- Always use condoms or dental dams during oral sex.
- Avoid sexual activity if you or your sexual partner are unwell, especially if either of you have symptoms of syphilis. This includes rashes, skin lesions, swollen lymph nodes, hair loss, muscle and joint aches, headaches and fatigue.
- Get tested for STIs regularly.

### **What is congenital syphilis?**

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 are older, which can lead to a delay in diagnosis.



**I'm ashamed of telling my partner(s) that I've got syphilis. How do I approach the conversation?**

STIs are nothing to be ashamed about. They are common and many people will have an STI in their lifetime. If you are nervous about telling your partner(s), you can use an anonymous contact tracing system or work with your health provider to decide an appropriate method.

**Is there a cure for syphilis?**

Syphilis can be cured with antibiotics, but the damage done to your body may be irreversible, which is why it is important to get tested regularly and treated as soon as possible.

**Can I catch syphilis again if I've been treated for it previously?**

Yes, it is possible to be re-infected with syphilis once treatment has been completed. Unless a person knows that their sexual partner(s) have been tested and treated for syphilis, they could be reinfected by an untreated partner.

**Where can I find more information?**

For more information about syphilis go to [health.gov.au/syphilis](http://health.gov.au/syphilis).