

Syphilis

Syphilis is a bacterial infection caused by *Treponema pallidum*. Almost all cases occur as sexually transmitted infections, though an infected pregnant woman can infect her baby in the uterus or during vaginal delivery. Some babies with congenital syphilis are stillborn and others may have severe deformities.

Syphilis acquired as an adult has the following symptoms:

- > An incubation period of nine to 90 days (averaging three weeks) during which time the person has no symptoms.
- > A *primary* stage in which a hard, usually painless, ulcer called a chancre develops at the site of infection, usually on the genitals. Untreated, the primary chancre usually goes away within four weeks. There is often painless swelling of lymph glands during this stage. The chancre may be inside the vagina in women, or inside of the mouth or anus, depending on how the infection was acquired. The person may not know they have the infection.
- > A *secondary* stage occurs two to four months after infection, lasts several weeks and often comes back in the following two years. The most common feature is a flat, red rash over the whole body. Syphilis is one of the few causes of this sort of rash on the palms and soles. Many other symptoms commonly occur and almost any part of the body may be involved.
- > A latent period with no symptoms or obvious signs of disease usually lasts for the remainder of the person's life.
- > A tertiary (third) stage may occur in up to 30% of untreated individuals. In some cases the disease may involve the brain and spinal cord (neurosyphilis), or the heart and blood vessels (cardiovascular syphilis), producing severe complications, disability and even death.

Diagnosis of syphilis can be made during the primary stage by microscopic examination of a scraping from the base of the chancre, though this test is not commonly performed. Later, diagnosis is made by blood tests. Syphilis involving the brain and spinal cord is confirmed by testing of cerebrospinal fluid (fluid from around the brain and spinal cord).

Incubation period

(time between becoming infected and developing symptoms)

9 – 90 days, with an average of 3 weeks from contact to the development of a chancre.

Infectious period

(time during which an infected person can infect others)

During primary and secondary stages and possibly the first 4 years of the latent period. A person is no longer infectious 24 to 48 hours after starting appropriate antibiotic treatment.

Treatment

Effective antibiotic treatment is available. Treatment needs to be supervised carefully and long-term follow-up is required, particularly for patients with late stage syphilis infection. Treatment of the mother during pregnancy may be sufficient to prevent foetal infection. Sometimes babies require an additional course of antibiotics after birth.

Control of spread

- > No sex until treated.
- > Practise safer sex – use condoms or dental dams.
- > Sexual partners need to be contacted, tested and treated.
- > Pregnant women are screened for syphilis in early pregnancy (and again in late pregnancy if they are at increased risk of acquiring syphilis).
- > Testing to exclude other sexually transmitted infections is advisable.



Syphilis is a notifiable disease

- > **Avoiding Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI)**

Useful website

- > **Clinic 275**
<http://www.stdservices.on.net/std/>