

What is Syphilis?

- Syphilis is a bacterial infection caused by *Treponema pallidum* that is transmitted through oral, genital, or anal sex
- It can also be transferred from mother to unborn child (congenital syphilis), causing birth defects or death in 40% of babies
- It may also be transmitted through sharing needles or broken skin
- Untreated syphilis can cause serious health problems

What are the symptoms of Syphilis?

- Symptoms of syphilis are only observed when the infection is active
- However, syphilis can still be transmitted to others when the infection is inactive
- Symptoms may be mild and be similar to symptoms of other infections, which may cause syphilis diagnosis to be overlooked

There are four stages of syphilis, which have different symptoms

- In the primary stage, a painless open sore appears at the site where the bacteria entered the body (often the genital area, throat, or anus)
 - Symptoms may occur within a few days or months after infection.
- In the secondary stage, symptoms such as patchy hair loss, a rash, fever, malaise, swollen glands, and flat, grayish-white sore in the mouth and on the genitals may occur
- In the tertiary stage, blindness, problems with the nervous system and heart, and mental disorders can occur
 - If untreated, syphilis can lead to death.

How is Syphilis Diagnosed?

- Syphilis is diagnosed by physical examination and blood test
- Your doctor will also send a report to your provincial or territorial health unit
- Anyone experiencing STI-related symptoms or who has sex with someone with an STI should be tested for syphilis
- You should be tested for syphilis every 3-6 months if you have multiple sexual partners
- All pregnant people should be tested in the first trimester and again during delivery

How is Syphilis treated?

- Syphilis can be cured with antibiotics prescribed by a physician
- However, antibiotics cannot undo any damage caused by late-stage syphilis
- The preferred drug for treating syphilis is penicillin, but other medications may be used if you have a penicillin allergy
- Follow-up blood tests may be ordered to ensure the treatment was effective
- To prevent syphilis, practice safer sex by limiting your sex partners, knowing whether your partner engages in risky sexual behaviours, and use a condom or dental dam during sex.

References:

- Government of Canada. Syphilis. 2021. [Cited 2022 Feb 2]. Available from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/syphilis.html>
- Government of Alberta. Syphilis. 2021. [Cited 2022 Feb 2]. Available from: <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Health/Pages/conditions.aspx?hwid=hw195071>
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