

Syphilis

If left untreated, syphilis can cause serious health problems.

Cause

Syphilis is caused by a bacterium called *Treponema pallidum*.

Symptoms

A painless sore usually appears on or near the genital area or mouth around 3-12 weeks after infection. This generally heals within 2-3 weeks but the syphilis bacteria remains in the body.

If left untreated, the infection moves into its secondary stage, usually 2-6 months after the initial infection. Symptoms at this time can include a rash (especially on the hands and feet), swollen glands and hair loss. A person is highly infectious during this stage, which can last up to two years.

The third stage of syphilis may occur many years later and have no visible symptoms. If left untreated, damage can occur to the brain, nervous system and circulatory system.

How is it transmitted?

Syphilis is transmitted through unprotected vaginal, anal and oral sex. A pregnant woman with syphilis can pass it onto her baby in the womb.

How do I know if I have it?

Testing for syphilis involves a blood test.

Treatment/Management

Penicillin injections can help cure syphilis, especially if administered in the early stages of infection. Antibiotics may also be prescribed, and both partners should be treated. After this time more complex medical treatments may be required, as untreated syphilis can cause serious illness.

Prevention

Using condoms is the most effective method of avoiding infection during sexual activity. Sex should be completely avoided when symptoms of syphilis are present.

Practising safe sex reduces the risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

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For further information on sexual health visit the family planning website:
<http://www.fpwa-health.org.au>

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