

# Syphilis

While not especially prevalent in the general population, syphilis is becoming increasingly common among men who have sex with men and in many Indigenous communities.

## Cause

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

## Symptoms

A painless sore (similar to an ulcer) 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 causes brain damage, skin and mouth ulcerations, paralysis and heart and blood vessel problems.

Untreated syphilis can also be a cause of repeated miscarriages and death of newborn babies.

## How is it transmitted?

Syphilis is transmitted through unprotected vaginal, anal and oral sex, or direct contact with open sores. 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 cure syphilis if administered in the early stages of infection and both partners must be treated. In the later stages of illness more complex medical treatments may be required, and severe effects of late disease such as paralysis are irreversible.

## 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.

**For more information about syphilis contact the Sexual Health Helpline on 9227 6178 or 1800 198 205 (country callers) or email [sexhelp@fpwa.org.au](mailto:sexhelp@fpwa.org.au)**

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



70 Roe Street, PO Box 141, Northbridge, WA, 6865  
ph: (08) 9227 6177 fax: (08) 9227 6871

[www.fpwa.org.au](http://www.fpwa.org.au)  
[info@fpwa.org.au](mailto:info@fpwa.org.au)

Sexual Health Helpline (08) 92276178 or 1800 198 205 (Country Callers)  
[sexhelp@fpa.org.au](mailto:sexhelp@fpa.org.au)

Quarry Health Centre for under 25s  
7 Quarry Street, PO Box 378, Fremantle, WA, 6959  
ph: (08) 9430 4544 fax: (08) 9430 4544  
[quarry@fpa.org.au](mailto:quarry@fpa.org.au)

© Family Planning Association of WA (Inc) March 2006