



# Syphilis

## What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial infection that is passed through the mucous membranes from a person who has an infection. The infection has 4 stages: primary, secondary, early latent and late latent.

## How can I get syphilis?

You can get syphilis where there is skin-to-skin contact or exchange of bodily fluids with a person who has an infectious syphilis sore (lesion) or rash. This can happen through close contact or sexual contact with a person's mouth, genitals, or rectum when a syphilis sore or rash is present. Syphilis can also be transmitted to a baby from their mother during pregnancy or at birth.

While both women and men can acquire syphilis, the vast majority of people diagnosed with syphilis in B.C. are men who identify as gay, bisexual, or men who have sex with men (MSM). Syphilis rates have increased greatly for MSM, mostly among 20 to 24 year-olds.

If you have another sexually transmitted infection (STI) you have a greater risk of getting syphilis.

## What are the symptoms?

Each stage of syphilis has a different set of symptoms. The symptoms can vary or be so mild that you may not know you have a syphilis infection.

To find out if you have syphilis, you must be examined by a health care provider and have your blood and sore(s) tested.

## Primary stage

During the primary stage, a painless sore can develop anywhere on your body that came into contact with a person who has a syphilis infection. The sore usually appears about 3 weeks after first contact, but can appear anywhere between 3 and 90 days after acquiring the infection. Sometimes, the sore will not be noticeable on your body. The sore will go away on its own within a few weeks, however the disease will continue to spread.

## Secondary stage

The secondary stage usually starts about 2 to 12 weeks after getting a syphilis infection, but can start anywhere from 2 weeks to 6 months from infection. During this stage a non-itchy rash may develop. The rash can appear anywhere on your body, but it is most often found on your chest, belly, genitals, palms of your hands, and soles of your feet. You may not notice the rash, but you can still spread the disease to other people. The rash usually disappears but it can come back months later. Other symptoms may include headache, fever, hair loss, swollen lymph nodes and bumps or mucous patches inside the mouth, anus, penis or vagina.

## Latent stages

After the rash goes away, and if you do not receive treatment, the disease will progress to the latent, or hidden, stages of syphilis. You may not have any symptoms for a period of time. The latent period can last up to 30 years.

- Early latent stage: when a person has acquired a syphilis infection in the past year. People who have 'early' syphilis can spread the infection more easily to their sex partners.

- Late latent stage: when a person has a syphilis infection for more than 1 year. If you do not receive treatment, you can continue to have a syphilis infection for years without any signs or symptoms.

### How to get tested for syphilis

Visit your health care provider to get a referral for lab work where your blood and any sore(s) will be tested.

It is recommended that MSM be tested for syphilis every 3 to 6 months, or immediately if you have symptoms, such as a sore or rash.

Screening for syphilis is recommended as part of prenatal screening for pregnant women. If you are pregnant, discuss your risk factors for STIs with your health care provider throughout your pregnancy to determine the need for STI screening, including syphilis.

You can access testing directly at certain lab locations in B.C. To locate the nearest testing clinic or get tested online, visit Smart Sex Resource at <https://smartsexresource.com/sex-talk/talk-about-it> and/or Get Checked Online at [www.getcheckedonline.com](http://www.getcheckedonline.com).

### What are the complications?

If you are not treated for syphilis, complications may occur early on in the infection or several years later. Complications may be neurologic (such as hearing or vision loss, or dizziness) or damage to your brain, heart and other organs in your body, which can lead to death.

Untreated syphilis in a pregnant woman can cause complications for her baby. Such as a miscarriage, premature birth or stillbirth, low

birth weight, or cause the baby to be born with syphilis (called congenital syphilis).

### What is the treatment?

During any stage, syphilis can be treated with antibiotics. Antibiotic treatment cannot undo the damage already caused by syphilis in the late latent stage, but it can prevent further damage. After treatment, you must have blood tests to make sure the treatment worked.

Any partner(s) you have had will need to be examined, tested and if infected, treated for syphilis. Do not have sex until 2 weeks after you and your partner(s) have finished the treatment and you have confirmed that the treatment was effective.

### Will my birth control pills work if I am taking antibiotics?

There is very little evidence to show that antibiotics reduce how well hormonal forms of birth control work. Examples of hormonal birth control include the pill, the patch, the ring, or the shot. If you are being treated with antibiotics, it is important to keep using your birth control as you normally would. If you have concerns, also use condoms until your next period comes after completing the antibiotics, or speak to your health care provider for more information.

### For More Information

For more information on how you can reduce your chance of getting an STI, see [HealthLinkBC File #08o Preventing Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\)](#).



BC Centre for Disease Control  
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