

# *Patients' Guide to* Syphilis

# What is syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial sexually transmitted infection (STI).

## How is syphilis passed?

- Sexual activity with an infected person (oral, vaginal, or anal sex, or sex with sex toys)
- Mother-to-child (during normal childbirth), also known as congenital syphilis
- Blood transfusion with contaminated blood products
- Injecting drug use or sharing needles

## What are the signs and symptoms?

The signs and symptoms can be difficult to recognise as most syphilis infections do not cause obvious signs or symptoms.

Primary	Secondary	Latent	Tertiary
Painless sore on genitals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Rash on palms and soles</li><li>• Swollen neck and armpit glands</li><li>• Growths on the genitals and anus</li><li>• Patchy hair loss</li><li>• Brain infection</li></ul>	No symptoms but internal organs may continue to be affected by disease	Permanent damage to the organs (e.g., brain, nerves, heart, and skin)

### Congenital

- Occurs when a child is born to a mother with syphilis.
- Signs and symptoms include bone deformities, blindness, deafness, skin rashes, deformed face or teeth, infant death.

## When do signs/symptoms appear?

Infectious		Non-Infectious	
Primary	Secondary	Latent	Tertiary
9-90 days after infection	Few weeks to 6 months after infection (sometimes up to 2 years)	Early: <1 year after infection  Late: >1 year after infection	5-30 years after infection

## *How is syphilis diagnosed?*

- Syphilis is usually diagnosed with at least 2 different types of blood tests.
- Fluids from ulcers or sores may also be examined.
- The doctor or nurse may also do a genital examination, which may include an internal examination of the vagina or penis, foreskin and opening of the urethra (where urine comes out).
- After sexual exposure, it can take up to 3 months for the blood tests to turn positive.

## *Who should get tested?*

Seek medical advice if you suspect you may be infected or if your partner(s) has tested positive.

Syphilis screening should also be part of one's regular sexual health check-up if one is sexually active.

## *How can syphilis affect pregnancy?*

- Pregnant women may pass syphilis to their unborn child, resulting in abnormalities in the baby.
- Pregnant women will be given monthly follow-up blood tests until delivery and continue with syphilis follow-ups.
- Babies will be tested at 6 months of age to ensure that they do not have syphilis.

## *Can syphilis be treated?*

Yes, syphilis can be treated and cured with penicillin injections or alternative antibiotics.

## *Do those with syphilis need to return for follow-up visits?*

Follow-up blood tests are done at 3 months, 6 months, 12 months, 18 months, and 24 months to ensure the infection has been adequately treated.

# *Important Notes on Syphilis*

- Repeat infections can happen as there is no permanent protection provided by a previous infection.
- Inform the doctor if one has any drug allergies.
- Inform the doctor if one has been treated for syphilis in the past. Even after recovery, syphilis blood tests may remain positive for life.
- Syphilis patients should not donate blood.
- Anyone diagnosed with syphilis should also be tested for HIV.
- Ensure that the sexual partner(s) go for check-ups so they can be treated early if they are infected.

## **Practice safer sex**

- Use condoms correctly during any kind of sex, i.e. oral, anal, vaginal.
- Avoid drinking excessive amounts of alcohol before or during sex as this may impair judgement.
- Have sex without an exchange of bodily fluids (e.g. semen or vaginal secretions).

## *Reach Out to Us*

If you still have queries, feel free to call us at the following numbers:

### **HIV/STI Hotline (Office hours)**

1800 252 1324

### **Health Info Recorded Hotline (24 hours)**

+65 6295 2944

### **Appointments**

+65 6293 9648

You may also visit [www.dsc-clinic.sg](http://www.dsc-clinic.sg), or find us at DSC Clinic 31 Kelantan Lane #01-16 S(200031).

## *Disclaimer*

We have attempted to provide full, accurate, and up-to-date information in this patient information leaflet, based on current medical evidence and opinion. However, information and advice may vary from different sources and over time. If you have any further questions, do see your doctor or healthcare provider.

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